

Sloan Bashinsky



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A STRANGE TALE

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Only fools rush in

*where angels fear to tread,
But if there were no fools,
Who'd lead the angels?*

For What It's Worth

I quit the practice of law in 1985, when it finally dawned on me that I would never reach mastery, thus quit merely practicing. I also quit because all of that thinking and scheming was killing me. I turned toward writing for publication, hoping to save my soul and become rich and famous, which never happened. So discouraged, I slowly but surely devolved into even more dubious careers and experiences, hoping also to save my soul and become rich and famous, with the same result. Five (or was it six?) divorces later found me living on and just off the street in Key West, in the early winter of 2000. Quite a plummet for someone born with a silver spoon in his mouth and who, in 1995, had one million dollars and no debt, and who had spent many moons in the Florida Keys living in high style.

In March 2001, I briefly met Birdie McClaine through another street performer known in the trade as Gazzo. However, I did not see Birdie perform in Key West, and did not see him again until I hitched a ride with Gazzo out of Key West in late April 2001. Gazzo was headed for Boston where his family lived, but he intended to stop off for a few days in Helen, Georgia, where Birdie lived. I was in no hurry to go to New England to spend the summer, having only a food stamp card and not a penny to my name, and knowing no one in the vicinity to mooch off. It was a God thing, I told Gazzo and others. They maybe thought I was insane or the product of too much LSD, or perhaps both. I never took LSD or anything like it. I was crazy *au naturale*.

Sleeping in my favorite doorway just off Duval Street the night before Gazzo and I left Key West, I dreamt of being taught by a street performer in a black derby hat to ride a six-foot unicycle in my own street act. When we

arrived in Helen two days later, Gazzo drove to the town center to watch Birdie perform. He wore a black derby hat and rode a six-foot unicycle in his street act. The next day, Birdie took me aside and said Gazzo had told him I was a writer. I said, yes, I had written several books. Birdie asked if I ever wrote novels? I said I had written three, one of which was published. Birdie then shared a storyline he said would make a dynamite movie, but first it should be written as a novel. Was I interested? I said yes. He told me what he had in mind.

I laughed, said I had pretty well lived a big piece of the plot the year before, so I figured I could write the book with the Spirit's help. I shared the dream I'd had just before leaving Key West. Birdie's jaw dropped. I said I had no computer or place to live. Birdie offered to put me in a tent at his place and said there was a seldom-used word processor in the public library in Helen on which I could write the novel. I said that was all I needed. So, I hitchhiked into Helen every day to write the novel over the next six weeks. I also got a part-time job at a local nursery and craft store, earning a few bucks a day for beer, incidentals, and food after the food stamp card ran out of credit.

Unmeasured gallons of blood, sweat and tears flowed, as this intriguing tale wrote itself in ways my eager and still-very-much-alive street lawyer mind seldom anticipated. I was hauled unawares back into the essence of bittersweet experiences I thought were laid to rest but were still simmering, wanting another back scratch to truly put them to rest in peace. In many ways it was like watching an insane movie about me, again, but this time I was laughing and groaning in the audience, as well as on stage. And, sometimes I was the producer and director. Besides, all of life *is* street theater, is it not? And none of it is true except the parts our hearts say are true.

From time to time after it was written, I shared copies of this greater than life stranger than fiction epic tale with various amigos, with the proviso they could read it and share it with others, but they could not use it to make money. I sternly warned that violation of that sacred trust would result not in a copyright infringement suit, but in a colossal gypsy spell being cast upon the thief, enforced by the Literary God. The hapless criminal then would be converted into a squeaky-clean prince, who would never again live the simple life of a mere warty frog. Having once been

programmed to be such a tormented prince, I assure one and all that being a bug-zapping horny toad is a whole heap more fun.

Princes must be perfect in every way. There can be no typographical errors in what they write; every sentence must contain subject and predicate, and it is not proper to change tenses in mid-stream. Princes's pennings much (oops!), must match those of Dickens or Tolstoy, and make the great man of celibate letters, St. Paul, even stand up and take note. Alas, writing and even living into such pristine perfection oft takes longer than just living in the first place, and thus steals away precious time and energy for yet another imperious frog caper! Therefore, as you read this absolutely intended insult to Prince Reality, which is not about living on the street, but is about something a hell of a lot more bizarre, please try to keep in your all-knowing heart this frog poet's creed:

Who invented the rule that poetry must rhyme, have pentameter and be cast into verse, or remain on the safe side of the fence? Yes, please tell me who, just who, invented that silly rule? Surely it wasn't the maker of the first stone –otherwise, there'd be no stones to break all the slaving rules!

Also try to keep in mind, as "I" wrote this wacky love poem disguised as a novel, I fell into bottomless love with a female coworker at the nursery and craft store in Helen. I told her that God was writing the novel, and after she read the finished manuscript, she said God did write it. Not in a churchy way, but in a not entirely of this world way.

ACT I

The Twilight Zone

The Fall

How many times had he tried it and had it not work out. He had sometimes wondered if he was studying to receive a Ph.D. in women. Myriad girl friends. Three awful marriages. Three divorces, two children by the first marriage he now seldom saw—Salle and Hector. Riley could never bring himself to name a son Riley, for it was often mispronounced "Really," not always in kind jest. Yet it was a good name for Riley, for his life had always been strange.

He had often wondered if he was even from this planet, so alien had he felt here since his early years. He'd had experiences since his adolescence and teens that he never shared with another living soul. Not of this world experiences he knew better than to talk about, even to his parents. These experiences had never harmed him, and, in fact, had been his friends in times when it seemed he had no human friends. Well, he actually did have human friends, but with them he could only share about one-third of himself. His wives had all said it was as if he was off somewhere else most of the time. He was.

Then along came Mary Lou Snow and lit Riley up like a Christmas tree. That was strange in a new way. It was strange because Riley felt with Mary Lou like he had died and gone to heaven but was still living on earth. She said she felt that way, too. Like Riley, she had done plenty of time in the war between the sexes. Like Riley, she'd also had her share of experiences about which she could speak to no one. When she and Riley came together the otherworld experiences stopped for them both, as they melded with each other. But if that bliss had lasted, then there would not be this tale to tell. And it didn't last.

Mary Lou upped and won the state lottery—fourteen million fucking dollars was her share of the pot of gold. Riley didn't even know she had bought a lotto ticket until she told him she had won. It wasn't like her to do that: buy a lottery ticket, or keep something from him. Her veterinary practice was lucrative, as was his trial law practice. They paid the government more each year than most families make in several years. They lived by their wits and talents. They told all. No secrets. No fig leaves.

Riley said this to Mary Lou, then added, "I don't think you should go in and claim it. It's a temptation. What do we want with all that money? What would we do with it? Who all's going to come begging for it once they find out we have it? It will be a nightmare!"

"You got to be joking, huh?" she laughed her beautiful laugh.

Riley said he wasn't joking.

Mary Lou got really mad. Riley got really mad. They had their first real fight. No, it wasn't a fight: it was all-out war. Riley never saw someone get so mad, as Mary Lou got. Not even parents who lost a child in an automobile accident ever got that mad, at least not in his presence. And he had represented a few bereaved parents. Not even a woman who just found out her husband was messing around on her ever got that mad in Riley's office. Not even a lawyer who lost out on landing a big money case to some lawyer whose case runner just also happened to be the losing lawyer's case runner, but the losing lawyer didn't know the case runner ran for two lawyers, ever got that mad. Riley had actually had that happen to him.

It scared Riley that Mary Lou got so mad. It scared him real bad. So he quit fighting and tried to talk about how to go about collecting the prize in a sane way. "Let it wait. Get a lawyer we know and trust to keep it quiet, to go in and claim the money by producing the winning ticket. Then we get the money secret like from the lawyer and put it somewhere nobody in these parts will ever find out about it. Off-shore. Then we use it in a way nobody ever gets suspicious," Riley pleaded.

By now Mary Lou was too upset to listen. "I'm going in to get it first thing in the morning," she growled, giving Riley a look that convinced him discretion was the better part of valor. "Keep your big mouth shut," he said to himself. "Maybe before tomorrow morning she will come to her senses."

It didn't happen. Out the door Mary Lou charged first off the next morning after canceling her appointments for half a day. On the way back from Montgomery where the state lotto headquarters were, the front left tire blew out on Mary Lou's black Camry—the police never found out what caused it—ripping the tire to shreds at eighty-five miles per hour the accident investigator later would estimate. The Camry veered out of control, lurched into the median of the Interstate and careened down into the dividing concrete culvert, striking the up slope head-on, which flipped the Camry out of the culvert onto its top and rolled it a few times. Then it caught fire.

Mary Lou had taken the lotto pay-out in their joint names, survivor take all, to make sure no lawyers ever got their hands on it. All that was taken out it was the Alabama taxes. When Governor Don Siegleman, who had railed for the lottery to support lower education in Alabama, signed the bill approving it waving a Confederate Flag, as he issued a verbal executive order, recorded by television crews from local television stations, that the Great State of Alabama was not going to cut out federal taxes from any lottery winner's winnings. It was a matter of "State's Rights," and if the federal government wanted to collect its taxes, then it would have to deal directly with lottery winners.

So Riley got fourteen million dollars to remember her by. He set out to spend it all on booze. They had enjoyed a beer or two after work, a glass of wine at dinner. They hadn't done any other drugs, except loving each other and their professions. Neither of them went to church, nor had their parents. They had been taught they were always in church; God is everywhere. God is love. God was actually hell-squared, Riley now decided.

It really didn't require his doctor saying it for Riley to know he was depressed and sinking inexorably into a black pit out of which he might never climb. His friends saying it would pass, if he only would put all his time into his work, fell on deaf ears. Riley knew his friends' love life was just like his love life before Mary Lou came along.

Perfect in every way, Mary Lou had fit Riley like a glove. Now he felt like one-half of him was gone, ripped out of him, torn away, taken, stolen. His chest and throat were being slowly squeezed

flat; soon he would not be able to breathe. The doctor's pills only made him feel worse in other ways and did nothing to ease the symptoms of losing Mary Lou. So Riley flushed the pills down the toilet.

He was barely able to admit to himself that he had killed her. If only he had not argued, then she would not have gotten so upset and would have driven more slowly. Maybe even she would have waited and agreed to get a lawyer to handle it quietly. Then she would not have gone at all. She would still be with him, running to greet him whenever they had been apart: coming home from work, the store or to gas up a car. The incredible special feeling that they almost always felt when they were together— "the space" they had called it for want of a better description—was gone. The space felt like heaven on earth. Its absence *was* hell on earth.

Yet the space was even paled by their love making. Divine Passion. Ecstasy. Mary Lou came time after time, making sounds and movements like what Riley imagined an angel might make on first being touched by God. With each orgasm Mary Lou released enough fluid to soak through a doubled-up extra thick towel. Riley came very slowly, rising in multiple delicious stages to orgasm that seemed to onset several minutes before he actually ejaculated. He lost his mind when he came, when she came again even as he came, no matter how many times she had already come. Something animalistic, prehistoric came up out of him in that moment of total union. The sounds he made and the feelings he had were not human, at least not modern human. After Riley came, they both passed out. Drugged it seemed.

Gone. All of it gone. Over money. Over fighting. Never once did it occur to Riley that it was meant to be, fated. Always he felt in his bones it could have been avoided. He hated Mary Lou for it. How could she have put money ahead of what they had? Especially how could she have done it when they already had more money than they knew what to do with? Maybe she wanted the money to give away? They had talked about giving money to people in need. But that would have been in secret. No, Mary Lou had not wanted this to be in secret. She had wanted the world to know she had won the lottery. Why?

There was no why. No answer. Only rage. Despair. Black. Death. Before Mary Lou, Riley had never written a poem. After she came he could not stop writing poems. They kept his poems in a private journal. The first poem mirrored their relationship, from Riley's point of view.

*He feels deep beauty in the dark pool
from which his writings flow,
She clings to him like heavy silk, precious oil,
He feels compressed, solid like...a black pearl
growing from inside out,
ever larger with each stroke of his pen
pushing her precious waters over her banks
into his dreams and life.*

Riley's soul was dying. He could feel it. He burned the poem journal. No help. Nor was there any help in going to church, in desperation, with well-meaning friends. In church Riley wanted to jump up and run outside screaming "God is dead! God is dead!"

They had spent much of their free daylight time walking in the woods and meadows near their

home south of Birmingham, fishing the nearby lakes, canoeing the Cahaba River and lesser streams. They had taken ecovacations into the Caribbean garden islands of Dominica and Bequia in the Grenadines, and into lovely Costa Rica, and Nepal and the Australian outback and New Zealand. Their beauty was in their relationship and Mother Nature.

"What in the hell am I going to do?" Riley silently screamed, day after day, night after night, week after week. "I can't survive this hell other people live in now that I know it for what it is! I was in Eden. We were one, with God. Now she's gone and God really is dead!"

No one could Riley tell this. Who would understand who had not been in Paradise with Eve and then lost her? "No damn wonder Adam left with Eve!" Riley exclaimed to himself in fury one day, driving to a pub after work. "No damn wonder. The poor bastard was unable to live without her. Goddammit, I wish we'd never met! God, fuck, shit! Help! Take this pain from me! Please!!!!"

That night, Riley wrote a poem. Or rather, a poem fell out of him. The motif was so very familiar and special.

There once was a rabbit

*who was attacked by a big mean dragon,
So God sent her a prince disguised as a dragon
who loved her so much that she lost her wits*

and in her confusion

she chose the dragon instead of the prince.

*The prince was so upset that he turned into the dragon, and then begged God to send him
another rabbit*

*who would never mistake him for a dragon,
But who, instead, would see that he was a prince and kiss him and turn him back into one
again.*

After turning in for the night and finally falling into a restless sleep, Riley dreamt of a black rabbit. It sits in a bed of golden daffodils in full bloom. Daffodils are Mary Lou's flower. The rabbit hops toward him, nuzzles him with its cold wet nose. He wakes up bawling his eyes out.

By and by he falls back asleep and dreams again. Mary Lou comes to him in her lavender silk three-quarters nightgown he bought for her just after they were first intimate. Her black hair sparkles like it is made up of black diamonds. Her dark eyes are deeper than a pool of black pearls. It's easy to get the gown up over her head, but it feels so good they leave it on and he goes in underneath it. She draws him to her, down upon her, into her. "I'm so terribly sorry, Riley. I just went crazy. It wasn't your fault. I love you forever..." He wakes up, weeping.

As is your scribe now weeping. He can only write what he has experienced in equivalence. For he has learned that although he sometimes tries to write fiction, all characters are characters in himself, all plots are plots within himself. There are no surprises, only his surprise to find the parts of himself he has lost, thrown away, forgotten or never even knew were there. In this way, perhaps he and God are something alike: they both create to discover just what and who they really are.

The Cuckoos' Nest

On the third day of Riley not coming in to the office, and not being able to reach him by telephone, beeper or email, his law firm called the police. They felt there was no other choice.

When the police arrived at Riley's home, no one answered the doorbell. The garage door was closed and there was no way to see if his car was inside. So they broke in and found him sitting in his blue leather recliner, unshaven, smelly, glassy-eyed. Catatonic. Several empty bottles of tequila lay on the floor beside him. There was no evidence he ate lately. No dirty dishes, nothing in the trash can but more empty tequila bottles. No sign in the bathrooms of pills, other than a nearly full bottle of Tylenol and another of Ibuprofen. The many phone messages from the law office, clients and friends had not been listened to, according to BellSouth's answering service.

The rabbit poem was on the top page of a note pad on a small table beside where Riley sat. Another poem was on the next page.

*Mary Lou, Mary Lou,
I love you, I love you,
but you went away
and my heart and soul went with you...*

*Now all I have left is fourteen million dollars
and dreaded memories of our love
that money bought and stole away.
You say you went crazy:
Now I join you there
so we are together again...*

Respectable lawyers usually receive VIP from police officers. The police called Riley's law firm and asked how the firm wanted this handled. The partner they reached was the one who had called in the police in the first place.

Ronnie Davis and Riley went back to childhood. They had played sports on the same teams through grade and high school, separating for college—Ronnie went to Auburn, Riley to Alabama. Then both had attended law school at Alabama. After passing the bar exam, they had put out their

shingles together: Davis & Strange, by a coin toss. They were the senior partners in the firm they had begun twenty years previously, by fighting and scrapping, taking court-appointed cases, walk-in cases, hustled cases, referred cases, mostly poor-paying cases initially. But as they paid their dues, their cases grew richer dollar-wise. Their skills increased and their reputation as trial lawyers spread over Alabama and beyond.

Ronnie asked the officer to bring Riley to Hillcrest Hospital, the only private psychiatric hospital in the state. Hillcrest lay on a low ridge of the Appalachian chain on the eastern outskirts of Birmingham. The police helped Riley stumble out of the back of the patrol car in which he had ridden, caged and accompanied by an officer whose son Riley had once gotten out of a serious difficulty. Ronnie was stunned. He saw nothing in Riley's eyes. No recognition. Nothing. Riley was gone. (How close did this scribe come to gone over losing his own Mary Lou to baubles of this world. How close. Tears.)

Riley's parents had passed over some years after his older brother died in Viet Nam. Salle and Hector were far away, near their mother. When called by Ronnie about their father, they said they didn't want to get involved, for the law firm to handle it. In an expedited probate hearing behind closed doors in the judge's chambers, Ronnie was appointed Riley's legal guardian.

For three days Riley ate some of the hospital food put before him. But he never spoke, or asked for something different to eat. He used the bedpan when the nurse brought it. Otherwise, he lay in bed, staring blankly into space, or sleeping. Ronnie could not get Riley to speak during his morning and evening visits, going to and from work. Nor could the nurses or doctor.

William Stakely, M.D., looked to be about sixty. Thin, reserved, his eyes twinkled. Beneath the twinkle was depth earned only through experience. No nonsense, he told Ronnie that he didn't know if Riley would ever come back. There was no point in pills. Drugs were used to control mental illness, but with Riley there was nothing to control. Either they could try to wait it out, or they could attempt to provoke Riley out of his catatonia with electro-convulsive (electro-shock) therapy. There was no immediate hurry; they could wait a week or two. But to wait longer to use ECT might lose what window of opportunity might still exist. That Riley was eating and using the bed pan indicated he was not totally gone, the doctor said.

"If Riley was your brother or son, Doctor Stakely, what would you do?"

"Mr. Strange still has alcohol traces in his blood and I would not do anything until he has finished the detox. Then I would begin ECT, Mr. Davis."

"Aren't there side effects to ECT? Memory loss, I've heard."

"The longer the course of ECT therapy, the more side effects we see. Some memory loss is one side effect. Another is flattening in the personality and loss of emotional affect. But this typically occurs when ECT is used over a long period of time. We would use ECT conservatively, to see if we can bring him back to us. Then, if more ECT is indicated, we go from there."

"Riley is like my own brother, Doctor, and I authorize you to do it. Here's a copy of the guardianship papers for your file. I have legal standing under those papers to authorize whatever course of treatment you recommend, with which I also agree. We must dot our i's and cross our t's, you know, in this day of malpractice mania."

Dr. Stakely smiled wanly.

"Do you wish to be present for the treatments, Mr. Davis? It might be helpful, if Mr. Strange does come back and finds a familiar face. Otherwise, he might believe he is on Mars or has been abducted by aliens, so to speak, and decide to go back to wherever he now is."

"Yeah, Doctor. I will be here. Just tell me when."

"You can be here early, say six-thirty?"

"I'd prefer that, Doctor."

Okay. We will call and let you know what day. Come here, to my office, and someone will bring you down to the treatment room. It's on another floor."

Unknown to either man, Riley is now having a rather serious discussion with Mary Lou somewhere else. There are no bodies in this somewhere else, but there is emotion, although not the same emotion human beings know. It is softer and yet more poignant. True emotion, not masked by this or that human filter, defense mechanism, addictive behavior or drug. This emotion is love. No hiding. Reality. In this emotion, Mary Lou tells Riley his time is not yet come and he has to go back. In this emotion, Riley knows he must go back but he doesn't want to go back. He is furious. "But how can you not go back?" Mary Lou reminds, "after telling so many clients that when the going gets tough the tough get going; that this, too, will pass; that day always follows night."

Riley's return was timed, however, to happen during the first ECT treatment. "Give science its due," Mary Lou had said, when she "hugged" him goodbye, finally. "I'm with you forever, Riley. There's no goodbye here. I'll be here when you return."

Riley came out of the catatonia during the ECT treatment, crying hysterically. Dr. Stakely looked surprised, then checked himself and turned to Ronnie, smiled, said, "This is good. His affect is back. He is feeling his pain. He will get better, I think. Please stay here with him for a while after I leave here, and come by my office before you leave the hospital."

Ronnie nodded.

As Riley's catharsis subsided, Dr. Stakely took his hand, said, "Mr. Strange, I am Dr. Stakely. I am a psychiatrist. You are in a hospital. Your good friend Mr. Davis from your law firm is here with us. And my assistants are here. You have been far away. We gave you a small electroshock treatment and you came right back. This is good, even though you don't feel good now and probably wish you were still far away. You have suffered in ways I cannot imagine, losing your wife. I have never lost a wife or a child. Or a brother. Your pain is real and is deep. You may wish to cry again. You may wish to cry many times again. I hope you can do that, if you feel like doing it. That will be good medicine, far better medicine than I can provide. I have asked Mr. Davis to stay with you for a while, and to come back tonight. He has been here day and night, since you came here two weeks ago."

"Two weeks?" Riley whispered.

"Yes, you have been here two weeks."

"Comatose?"

"No, catatonic."

"Wow."

"Do you have anything you would ask of me now, Mr. Strange?"

"No, not just yet, Doctor."

"Then I will leave now, but I will drop by your room before noon and perhaps we can talk some more then, if you wish."

"Sure. See you then." Riley's voice was getting stronger.

As the doctor left, Riley looked over at Ronnie, said, "Well, I guess I put you through a hell of a time, buddy."

"Don't go there, Riley. You are the one being put through a helluva a time. I can't imagine it."

"No, Ronnie, you can't. Nor can I even explain it. Living it is knowing it."

"Yeah."

"Yeah. I'm okay now, Ronnie. Go take care of the law firm. See you tonight?"

"Sure, tonight."

Back at Dr. Stakely's office, Ronnie received the game plan.

"As soon as possible, we will put Mr. Strange into group therapy, to support your and my private visits with him. He needs to see you daily, twice daily if possible. Bring him news from the office, case developments, new cases, office goings on. Tell him about your own life away from the office. Talk about what interests you both. Sports, politics, religion, sex, whatever. That will bring him down to earth, expedite his return to functionality, then to a meaningful life."

The doctor paused, continued. "I will be honest, Mr. Davis. Just one treatment would not be expected to bring off this result. It was as if Mr. Strange was primed to return and simply chose that moment in which to do so. Does he have a history of being a practical joker, a prankster? I ask this not because I believe he was faking, for I believe he was truly a long way off and didn't want to come back. I ask it because I wonder if at some subconscious level he had already made the decision to return, and so is it his nature to make comedy out of close calls?"

"Well, he does have a rather interesting wit about him, Doctor."

"Perhaps an example or two?"

"O.K. About a month before Mary Lou was killed, Riley went to a pretrial hearing in federal court. Federal judges are rather different from state court judges, in that they tend to try to influence the outcome of cases, especially civil cases such as this one: the decedent was killed at a train crossing about an hour after sunrise. Frankly, he didn't look both ways, but Riley took the case because there had been similar train-car-and-truck collisions at this particular crossing. Even so, the judge didn't think there was much of a case and suggested that it be settled for \$50,000, a paltry death settlement. This, of course, pleased the defense lawyer immensely. But Riley being Riley said he had tried enough cases in

twenty years to be able to estimate the value of the case, and he was going to let a jury decide the value, thank you.

"Doctor, you don't do this sort of thing, if you want to win any more cases before that judge. But this is Riley's way. He has a sixth sense, a nose the rest of the lawyers and judges don't enjoy. He gets jury verdicts that come in out of left field to everyone but Riley. Hell, for all I know Riley was bluffing in this case when he said that to the judge, but the defense lawyer didn't know he was bluffing. For all that appeared, Riley's nose was again sniffing something nobody else could smell. So all of a sudden the offer to settle was \$200,000, and Riley accepted the offer."

"That's interesting information, Mr. Davis. Can you give me another example of Riley's brinksmanship?"

"Well, Riley really doesn't like the practice of law, but it pays rather well and some of the cases are exciting to some degree. But how many gunslinger showdowns do you need to have, how many notches on your pistol grip are necessary, to make you feel that you've had enough?"

"And how many mentally ill people does a doctor like me need to see to want to try out another line of work?" Dr. Stakely opined.

"Perhaps. We treat problems in both professions, but nobody ever really gets well, now do they?" Ronnie chuckled.

Dr. Stakely nodded.

"Well, because of his national reputation for winning bad cases, which makes him rather unpopular in certain conservative circles but popular in other circles, Riley was invited to appear on the *Today Show* a few years back. Man, was he pumped up over that. As were the rest of us in the firm: that was about the best free advertising we could ever imagine. Go figure Riley, though. Brian Gumble played the devil's advocate, and acted as if he only wanted to talk about excessive litigation, runaway jury verdicts, instead of about the bad guys who caused so much litigation and runaway jury verdicts. Brian said many people wanted to kill all the lawyers.

"Riley being Riley, he said deadpan that, if Brian really thought all the lawyers should be killed, then the very first thing Brian ought to do was to stop using lawyers himself. Then he should launch a national movement, using his position as a TV personality as leverage, to get everyone in America to stop using lawyers. Riley added that he had made millions as a lawyer and now found lawyering mostly boring, and he would even help Brian sell this scam to the public. He paused for effect, then winked into the camera like he does to juries, and said that nobody would go for it, because three of Americans' favorite gods were money, power, and revenge, and those gods weren't going away anytime soon."

"Was he serious?"

"That's the kicker. For Riley, practicing law is just a game, no different from football or bumper cars out at the Fair Grounds. He has his role, clients have their role. It's all a game to him—life. All except Mary Lou. That was no game, Doctor. They had something I can't imagine. They had something real. I *know* Riley didn't come back to win any more lawsuits. With all those millions Mary Lou left him on top of what he had already made in the legal lottery, money is no longer a game for

him. What's his game now? What's his reason for living, Doctor, after losing the only thing he believes is real?"

"These sound like the questions a trial lawyer would ask, Mr. Davis."

"No, Doctor, they are the questions his best friend is asking. I know him, Doctor. He's not going to go back to being like he was. Whatever is coming down, it will be peculiar, eccentric, out of the blue as far as those who know him are concerned. He always finds a way to turn the screw in an unexpected way. Always."

"It almost sounds as if you have described a psychopath, Mr. Davis."

"No, Doctor, a psychopath hurts people, on purpose. Enjoys it. Never experiences remorse. We've had psychopath clients. Never gave a damn about anyone, not even their own lawyers. The devil to get paid by them. I never knew Riley to hurt anyone on purpose, and the few times he did unintentionally injure someone, it grieved him immensely."

"I was with him in there after you left. We spoke. He's lucid. He'll be out of here pronto, and you'll be in full accord with his leaving because you'll believe he's in full control of his faculties and is as sane as you and me. In fact, he's probably more sane than we two are together. He doesn't believe our lives are real, he doesn't believe life is real, except for the one thing—love. That's what Mary Lou gave to him, and then she stole it from him."

"That's the trial lawyer talking now. I know how to size up people even when they don't want to be sized up, even when they don't mean to give me anything to size them up. It's second nature to me, but with Riley, since he's my childhood friend and business partner, it's more than that. He's on a quest, Doctor, the Holy Grail. But my fear is he already found the Grail and won't find it again, because once it's found, how can it be lost? Can it be lost? That's your realm, Doctor. Or maybe not. Maybe only someone who has found the Grail, then lost it, can speak to such issues."

"Physician, heal thyself?" Doctor Stakely asked.

"I suppose so. I know I can't heal Riley, because I don't know what he's lost, or where he's been since Mary Lou died. And he's not saying. Nor will he tell you. Each of his wives told me that he was mostly off somewhere else when he was with them, but they never knew where and he didn't say. I know that side of Riley, experienced it many times. It went away when Mary Lou came, and now that she's gone I'm certain that side of him is back. It has to be back. It has to be."

"Now you sound as if you are describing a schizophrenic person, Mr. Davis."

"Dr. Stakely, if Riley is schizophrenic, then so was every prophet in history."

"Riley hears from God?"

"Don't you, Doctor?"

"Well, er..."

"Shit, Doc, half the people I know claim God talks to them. So as Riley's guardian, I must

insist that you not keep him here because he communes with something you cannot see or hear. Otherwise, I will have a lawsuit on your desk in the blink of an eye, accusing you and Hillcrest of working for the devil, among other things. Believe me, Doctor, your malpractice defense lawyer would not want *that* case tried before a Biblebelt jury in state court, where judges stay out of the jury's way. Nor would you want that."

Mexican Standoff

When Dr. Stakely arrived in Riley's room just before lunch, he found a patient in complete control of his faculties. There was no distant look in Riley's eyes, no slurring of words, no inattention, no incomprehension. Riley knew exactly where he was and exactly what he wanted: to leave as soon as possible and get on with his life. He was polite, grateful for the doctor's help, and even offered to represent him for free, if the doctor ever needed Riley's professional services.

Even so, Dr. Stakely had to ask a few trick questions, being a doctor of the mind and all.

"Mr. Strange, before waking up here, what is the last thing you remember?"

"Last thing I remember was writing two poems. Then it's all blank."

Dr. Stakely wrote something on his notepad.

"Mr. Davis said you are bored with the practice of law, and he feels you want to do something else."

"Yes, I'm bored, Doctor, but aren't you bored with being a psychiatrist?"

"Well, er."

"Please don't take that as an insult. We both are professionals. Our cases have different facts, but underneath the problems are much the same as our other cases. When was the last time you had a patient who presented something new to you?"

"You are such a patient, Mr. Strange."

"Yes, but that's because there's nothing wrong with me. Or rather, nothing wrong with me from a psychiatric perspective. I lost a woman I loved more than I loved myself. That is not a psychiatric problem, Doctor. It's a spiritual problem. Neither the law nor medicine address spiritual problems, but deal only with the secular. My loss is out of your jurisdiction, Doctor, as is it out of the jurisdiction of the law."

"Nevertheless, I believe you should remain here a few days, to let us be sure you are stabilized."

"Doctor, you do not want me in here. I'm not sick like your other patients. And I do not take

well to being jailed for something I did not do. I know what Ronnie told you would happen if you do not let me go. How do I know that? I know that because I am a lawyer. We take care of our own, just as doctors take care of their own. We call it the Lawyer Brotherhood, Doctor. And every judge in Alabama is also a member of that Brotherhood."

Riley's gaze pierced the wall of fear in Dr. Stakely's subconscious, then went deeper and pierced the truth in Dr. Stakely's heart. He liked this man, Riley Strange. No pretense. No sidestepping. No bluffing, either. Maybe he'd had a near-death experience but didn't remember it. There were many anecdotes of NDE's in medical journals, but it was not considered scientific. It was beyond the range of medicine, out of its jurisdiction, as Mr. Strange correctly judged.

Maybe Mr. Strange did speak with imaginary beings. So did most people, the doctor mused to himself. He would be put to admitting he believed that, if put to cross examination under oath. He also would be put to admitting that he himself often talked to something he could not see, and sometimes he got answers. One thing Bill Stakely prided in himself: he was an honest man. Indeed, on his own paternal grandfather's grave was inscribed, at his widow's direction: "God's noblest work is an honest man." Dr. Stakely believed in God, angels. He could not judge another man who did, too.

"I apologize, Mr. Strange. I spend too much time with people who are sick. I become a robot, perhaps. However, you have experienced deep trauma in your psyche, you have abused yourself with alcohol, you have been off somewhere you do not remember. This has to affect you in ways we cannot yet know. If I release you, say in the morning, can I gain your promise to be honest with either Mr. Davis or with me—you can call me day or night—if you feel that you are going out of control again?

"I say this with some amusement, because you do not strike me as the type who would reach out for help. Even so, it would assuage my conscience if I do gain this promise from you. And it will look good in your file, should something bad befall you and someone seeks to blame me for it. Also in your file will be your and Mr. Davis' threats to sue me if I do not let you go. And also in there will be my point of view: that, in your shoes, given your lucidity, I would probably have made the very same threat."

"Yeah, I make that promise to you, Doctor." Riley's gaze never wavered.

"Then that settles it. Tomorrow morning, assuming you are like you are today, you may leave."

"Thank you, Doctor. And my offer to represent you gratis remains open, even though I truly hope it's an offer you never have to consider accepting. Lawsuits are like a large boulder rolling down from a high mountain, knocking down many trees and crashing onto other boulders and chipping off bits of the boulder at every turn. By the time the boulder reaches the bottom, hundreds of trees have been killed and the boulder is ground down to a pebble. The client is both the dead trees and the pebble, Doctor. Then the client needs something beyond your expertise: only God can undo what a serious lawsuit does to a client, even to one who wins the case. And I get paid for being the instrument of the client's destruction. Maybe I might find another vocation."

All of this went onto Dr. Stakely's notepad. His lawyer had told him to always make a good written record, because records kept in the ordinary course of business are admissible into evidence just as they are written down.

Dr. Stakely felt Mr. Davis had made one misjudgment: Riley Strange did not bring back with him that part of himself that went way when Mary Lou came; the part that made him often seem like he was off somewhere else. Dr. Stakely also felt that something new had come back, but what it was, he didn't yet have a clue.

Omen

During the six months after his release from Hillcrest, Riley went to work early and came home late, and mostly stayed away from bars. And away from women—he has zero interest in another female liaison. It was the same as when he and Mary Lou were together: no other woman could turn his head, arouse him. Not a woman in a girly magazine, such as most of his male law partners liked to oggle; not a naked woman in a movie, not a woman in his office, on the street or in a pub. He forsook all others and cleaved only to one: Mary Lou.

The energy once channeled into their relationship now went into Riley's cases, which mysteriously began to settle for tidy sums not usually attained until the brink of trial, when defense lawyers finally get serious after bilking their clients out of a bundle per hour for months, even years. Some of Riley's early settlements were as good as what normally came after defense lawyers refused to pay over a settlement the jury figured would have ended a defendant's losing case which never should have been tried in the first place.

Juries had learned on television and from reading John Grisham novels how lawyers do what they do, and hope nobody else ever figures it out. But what has never been told is how defense lawyers attend motion dockets with a briefcase full of cases, answer the docket call for each case, argue a bit but usually not say much, then go back to the office and bill each file for an entire morning in court. At one-hundred-fifty dollars per hour per case, three hours in court with just three files adds up to \$1,350—\$450 per hour. Who would settle a losing case early and give away *that* kind of money?

Riley had often wondered what it would be like to bring a class action suit under the RICO Act, charging defense lawyers with racketeering. But then, plaintiff lawyers had their own foibles: paying police tidy sums to run cases, even from hospital rooms where a new client lay maimed and nearly dead as likely as not. Riley himself still had several active cases his firm had purchased in that very fashion. Honor among thieves.

While Riley was doing great with the cases he had, he wasn't bringing in any new ones. He wasn't worried about it, though, even though his firm was. He figured the way his cases were behaving was an omen, and as spring approached, he felt a growing hankering to head down to the Gulf Coast. In another month, the summer mob would descend and jam the roads and beaches, as had the just as large high school and college mob at spring break, to drug and fuck themselves silly. Sometimes a decent lawsuit hatched out of a mishap in that orgy.

Riley and Mary Lou had used an out of the way beach that the mobs didn't even know about. The first week in May, Riley called the campground to learn that the wind was blowing in from the southeast. Migrating pompano would be running with that wind on the beach. It was time to go to Port St. Joe and find out what the winds of change were bringing.

Port St. Joe lies in the Florida panhandle, about an hour's drive west of Panama City and nearly that much east of Apalachicola. A fishhook peninsula, Cape San Blas protrudes outward and easterly from Port St. Joe into the Gulf of Mexico, forming a large bay in front of the town. Port St. Joe was the original capitol of Florida before it was moved inland to Tallahassee after Port St. Joe was destroyed, once by a hurricane and another time by fire. The legislators got the message.

The state park runs along about eight miles of beach and almost virgin pine forest out to the tip end of the cape. The camping area lies in the half mile; the rest is reachable only on foot or by boat. Other than ranger vehicles, no vehicles are allowed past the two campgrounds.

When Riley arrived about two hours before sundown, seven hours after leaving Birmingham, the campgrounds were one-third full. The nearly tame skunks and raccoons, which begged food off campers, were already out making their rounds. He heard an alligator roar in the nearby brackish lake, as he settled in the campground closest to the ranger stations and campground store, where ice and such were sold. He wouldn't need to buy fresh bait, because he fished jigs for pompano. Yellow dudes, the jigs had been called before they were called pompano dudes.

After setting up camp in about an hour, Riley walked over the large sand dune on the wooden ramp, onto the beach. Despite nearby river estuaries emptying into the Gulf, the sea was clear enough for pompano to see a yellow dude worked slowly off the bottom, to resemble a sandflea. Small armadillo-shaped crabs, sandfleas are easily caught by hand in warm weather in the surf. These little critters are as to pompano as manna from heaven was to the Israelites. Fishermen who use live sandfleas murder pompano. Not sporting, in Riley's world.

Riley's father was the greatest fisherman in the world. His mother was the second greatest. They had brought him and his brother, Jack, to Port St. Joe when they were kids. They usually stayed two weeks. Whenever a west or north wind forced the pompano out into deep water to migrate, the Stranges walked over to the bay to wade for speckled trout and red fish. Or they drove back around to the mainland to rent wooden fishing boats and five horse motors at Preznal's Fish Camp east of St. Joe, and went out from there. They never lacked for fresh fish during a camping trip.

The best time to fish for pompano was early morning and dusk, when the sun wasn't making things so bright as to spook the fish. In half an hour Riley caught two silver 'nos' running about a pound each and strung them through the membrane in front of their eyes, so they could swim in the gentle surf on the stringer tied to his leg. He would release any more, if any more came.

Just as he was about to quit at dark, one more came. A monster 'no, or maybe a jack crevalle. It raced out of the beachside trough Riley was working and bulled its way across the inside sandbar and through the next trough onto the outside sandbar. There the run stopped. "A crevalle would still be going. This might be a world record 'no," Riley thought, as he began to gain line by raising his rod, then reeling in fast as he lowered it. Pumping and reeling, he gained back one-half of his line. Then the fish ran again, but not as far. It came back more easily, but still had fight left, swimming sideways, using the resistance of the water and the surge of the outgoing surf to add to its advantage. And that was enough. Just as Riley felt he would see the Godzilla fish in a wave, confirm it as a huge pompano, eight or nine pounds, probably a world record, the line went slack. The hook simply pulled out.

"Shit!" Riley exclaimed. "Couldn't you have waited until I saw you, to get away?" Then he remembered when much the same thing had happened to his father in just about this very same spot,

and his father had reacted the same way. His mother fishing nearby had laughed, teased, "Darling, how do you know that wasn't God you hooked out there?" His father grew pensive, said, "You got a point, wife. You aren't supposed to see God, at least not if you want to stay alive."

Riley used his filet knife to gut, gill and shave the thin scales off the two kept fish. He threw one in the ice chest and fired up his Coleman stove and cooked the other one whole in the bamboo steamer he and Mary Lou had often used. When the delicate white flesh was nearly done, he dumped in some of the fresh batch of vegetables he had picked up at the small produce stand in Cahaba Heights south of Birmingham, on this way down windy U.S. 280. Going through Eufala to reach Mariana had taken a bit longer than would have driving down I-65 through Montgomery and then U.S. 231 to Dothan, but it was a heck of a lot more scenic. Riley was in no hurry, and didn't care if he ever went back to Birmingham.

In assets, there is over two million dollars in securities, plus his debt free home. He is receiving almost \$120,000 a month, before taxes, on the ten-year lotto annuity, plus his \$25,000 a month draw from the law firm. If he quits the practice, he will be bought out. His share in the firm is currently worth about another million and a half. Not bad for a kid who didn't have a pot to pee in when he graduated from law school. And yet, he would gladly give every penny of it to have Mary Lou back.

That night, Riley dreams he is back on the beach, reeling in the big one that got away. Except this time it does something Riley never before saw a pompano do: it jumps high out of the water and shakes its head. Except its head is Mary Lou's head, and she doesn't look any too happy about being hooked. But he misses her, so he plays her for all he is worth toward the beach, slowly, surely, as she fights him every inch of the way.

When she finally throws in the towel and lies weakly on her gold and silver side in the surf, it's a thirty-five pound jack crevalle. This member of the jack fishes resembles pompano and fights like the dickens. Riley has seen people use dark-fleshed crevalle for cut bait, to catch sharks, sheephead, redfish and grouper. He has heard that people cut crevalles up in small pieces to bury under shrubbery, as fertilizer. And he has also heard that sometimes crevalles are used for making dog and cat food. But he has never heard of a person eating a jack crevalle. Yet, as the dream ends, he has cleaned and cooked a steak out of the fish, and it tastes almost like pompano.

Go Figure God

Every morning and evening Riley caught two or three pompano, keeping two for himself and giving the rest away to other campers and rangers, who at first had derided him for fishing with the yellow dude instead of sandfleas. Now rangers were standing in the surf up and down the beach from Riley, fishing dudes and catching pompano too.

Riley had fished dudes for pompano since his first trip at age seven to Port St. Joe, back in 1963. Although Jack was seven years older, they had many closely-contested fishing shootouts until Jack was drafted in 1971. The family never really recovered from Jack's death. His parents went to early graves; the doctors said it was heart disease. When Robert McNamara, the U.S. Secretary of Defense who had architech-ed Vietnam finally published his repentance, *In Hindsight*, and made

millions in book royalties and speaker fees, Riley wanted to hire a hit man to execute a confessed war criminal.

Riley's soul started to recover when Mary Lou came in 1995. Maybe he should be glad for those five-plus years in Paradise, but he wasn't. He wanted more, and was developing an intense dislike for the country that had invented the lottery that killed her. And the war lottery that had killed his beloved brother. And the divorce lottery that had given his children to their mother and kept them with her when she decided to move out of state. In sum, Riley was fed up with lotteries, including his law practice.

Seven days and nights in the park, fishing early and late, walking out toward the end of the cape during the day, feeding the beggar skunks and raccoons, and jawing with the other campers about the weather, it was as if Riley had always lived there. There was no urge to leave what now again felt like a soft, warm cocoon. Yet how many days would it be before he grew antsy, before the sense of being home faded and this place was spoiled? Another week, perhaps, he would stay. Then he would have to go back onto the world from which he had fled, to face the music. In the meantime, he had to leave the campground today to get some supplies: beer and vegetables to replace what he had brought with him in the spare cooler.

Rather than go in to the modern grocery store in Port St. Joe, Riley felt more like cruising east on the beach road over to U.S. 98, then taking that long and straight two-laner through the St. Joe Paper Company pine forest into Apalachicola. Maybe there would still be fresh oysters in one of the grubby little oyster and beer bars going into town. Even if oysters were not being harvested again until September, he could have a fresh fish dinner at The Hut, an icon to folks familiar with this part of Florida.

As it turned out, there was a produce stand just east of The Hut, featuring north and central Florida fresh vegetables. Riley marked that for his return trip. The first oyster bar did have fresh oysters, and he wolfed down a couple of dozen on the half shell, with a concoction of chili catsup, Woostershire sauce, horseraddish and fresh lemon he made at the table. He washed it down with a couple of draft Buds. He had been in this and nearby joints many times with his parents and Jack, then with his children when they were little, and later on vacations when they still came to visit, and finally with Mary Lou. Shit, everywhere he went—memories.

In The Hut, he sat at the same bay view window he and Mary Lou had

last sat beside here. Just across was a table packed with what appeared to be college kids, and an older fellow about Riley's age. They were dressed for stomping around in the bush: sweat shirts, thick cotton trousers, leather boots. Environmental studies students from Florida State in Tallahassee. The older man was their professor, had been bringing students here for ten years. This was an area of Florida that developers hadn't ruined. Still plenty of alligators, deer, pigs, rattlers. The swamps and salt water marshes teemed with birds and fish. "It's my Paradise," the professor said.

"Yes," Riley agreed. "Been coming down here myself since before those students of yours were born. I like the park up at St. Joe. Like to fish and walk the beach. Like the quiet. Like most of the folks who come there. The park rangers love the place, are determined to keep it the way it is despite all the pressure from developers to get their hands on it. Twenty years ago, beach front property outside the park was a dollar a front foot. Now it's out of sight. Houses and condos, and this and that kind of businesses going up along the road into the park. Makes me sort of wish for a big hurricane to come in,

make it like it used to be outside of the park."

"We're due for one of those, I suspect," the professor said. "It's been a while since one really smacked this area."

"Ever been in one?" Riley asked.

"No, but I've sort of imagined that a hurricane might be something to experience, being that I teach kids about nature. You ever been in one?"

"Not that kind."

The professor sensed what kind in Riley's eyes, nodded. The students didn't get it. Couldn't get it. Riley was glad when they called for their check and were gone. He wanted to eat alone. Fried fresh grouper filet, boiled red skin potatoes, coleslaw. Had the same meal last time he was here, with Mary Lou. Before the hurricane. The meal was great, but the memory ruined it. Riley was getting the sense he might not be coming back to these parts any time soon. Maybe never. Maybe he had come only to make his good-byes. Maybe he was headed into making many goodbyes.

Pulling into the produce stand parking lot headed back west on 98, Riley noticed the upper part of a large brunette woman behind the open window, partially shielded by small green containers of fresh tomatoes on the counter top. "God, she must weigh two-hundred-and-fifty pounds," Riley thought. "Lots of fried food, biskits and ice cream. No turnip greens. Lots of TV. Lots of misery in all that fat."

Walking up to her, Riley was stopped in his tracks. It was Mary Lou. Only about twice as big. Same hair. Same eyes. Same nose. Same mouth. Yes, same smile, same teeth.

"Can I help you, mister?"

"Uh, oh, yeah, I need some of everything you've got here, I imagine."

"Well, help yourself. It's all fresh in yesterday. Picked just before that and run up here on the produce truck that works this area twice a week."

Riley slowly picked over the tomatoes, making sure they were not bruised but also weren't too hard, meaning picked green. There were some new potatoes that looked good, and yellow squash. And several bunches of turnip greens with turnips still attached. Still alive, the greens were firm. He selected two bunches, and some oranges and grapefruit. He could come back, if need be. But in the meantime, he was having some difficulty with the waves of feelings rocking back and forth in his torso, and the tears trying to gush out of his eyes.

Riley had seen big women before; sometimes they were clients of his law firm. But usually he ran into them out in the country. Usually, they weren't too bright. Maybe they were inbred. This one, however, was reading *Bridges of Madison County*: it lay face down on the counter top. Her eyes were red. A box of face tissue sat on the table beside the high-legged chair on which she sat, barely.

"You like that book, ma'm?"

"Oh, I suppose. But it makes me cry, as you kin see."

Her voice tone sounded a lot like Mary Lou, but not her dialect.

"You don't like to cry?"

"Cryin's okay sumtimes. What I don't like is feelin' like my heart been ripped out when that poor woman turned down that wonderful man. She had to, of course, 'cause of her responsibility to her husband and kids, but still it just was awful."

"Yeah, it *was* awful."

"You read it then, Mister?"

"Yeah, my wife gave it to me when we were dating, before we were married. I didn't like it for the same reason you don't like it. Too tragic. Too unfair."

"Your wife with you, or you just passin' through on business or somethin'?"

"She died some months back. I came here to get away, rest, get a fresh outlook. I've been coming down here for most of my life, to camp and fish."

"Well, there's plenty of that goes on around here. And hunting. Not much else to do, though, but read and watch TV."

"Not much else for *you* to do, big as you are," Riley thought. "But at about half that weight, I can imagine you doing other things." In his mind's eye flashed those other things. In his heart and stomach fluttered butterflies. In his mind, up jumped the devil.

"This produce stand open every day?" he asked innocently.

"Shore is. 'Bout eight in the morning 'til sundown, this time of year."

"You here every day?"

"No way. Just three days a week. Monday, Tuesday and Saturday. It's my family's business. We all take turns."

"Where do you all live?"

"Just down the road the ways you are headed, 'bout a mile. Back in the pines a mile or so. I live in one of their trailers. My own place. My brothers live in the other two trailers with their wives and kids. My folks have a house they live in."

"Must be nice and peaceful back in there."

"Yeah, and boring."

"What's your name?"

"Willa Sue."

"Mine's Riley. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, Mister Riley."

"That's my first name, Riley."

"I figured that and was just being polite."

Riley had run across this before. Many of his country and black clients had called him Mister Riley. He always tried to stop it, and sometimes he succeeded, sometime not. "It makes me feel older than I want to be, when you call me Mister."

"Okay, then I'll call you Riley."

"Thanks."

Riley knew what he was going to do, but he didn't yet know quite how he was going to pull it off. He figured the dream about Mary Lou and the jack crevalle was the go-ahead, and by the time he reached to the campground he had it pretty much figured out.

That night Riley dreams of being high up in a bright red hot air balloon, looking down on a hive of ants. No, not ants, people. They just look like ants from this height, running here and there, work, work, work, oblivious to their greater surroundings until something comes along and squashes them, or drowns them, or burns them alive. As he awakens, Riley senses that he is looking at the world from God's eyes, and he is with God and not with the ants below. Therefore, he is not bound by the rules by which ants live. He can do whatever he wants, just like God. He can take life, and he can give life.

The Lottery

After fishing Monday morning, Riley cruised back down to Apalachicola. Willa Sue was in the produce stand when he passed by heading into the town and through it. He hadn't seen St. George Island in a while, and wondered if it had been further developed. Years before, a fine causeway and expensive bridge had been pork-barreled through the state legislature by land developers, to make St. George Island another Panama City. But remote St. George Island was from any major highway, city or airport, and the place had remained quiet and out of the way. It still was.

Riley drove to the east end of the island through the ranger station gate, and parked. He had never learned why these beaches were shell, but the ones at Panama City and west of there were sand. Mary Lou had collected shells to string into necklaces and to fill glass jars, for herself and others. One day out here they stumbled onto a dead baby porpoise barely two feet long. There was no indication of the cause of death; perhaps stillborn. Mary Lou wept. She never brought a child to term, for reasons the doctors never satisfactorily explained. Surgery stopped her from aborting her babies. It also opened her to throwing herself totally into her relationship with a man—Riley.

He stood on the beach approximately where they found the dead baby porpoise and buried it in the sand after digging a hole with their own hands. On top of the grave Mary Lou designed a wreath of sea shells and grasses nobody was supposed to pick from the nearby dune. Babies weren't supposed to die, either, she said. Or brothers or parents, Riley added. Mary Lou's parents were gone, too. Killed in a car accident when she was off at Vanderbilt in Nashville during her junior year. The insurance settlement was plenty to allow her to finish college and go to veterinary school at Auburn. Her patients had responded well to her care. Too well, sometimes, to suit other veterinarians. Mary Lou was accused of witchery, not entirely in jest. "If the other vets had only known," Riley chuckled, recalling the many miracles he knew had occurred in Mary Lou's clinic. He also knew Fate had steered her toward doctoring animals, because she would not have children. Now Fate had steered him to treat a human, because Mary Lou had left him.

In commemoration of his upcoming adventure in playing God, Riley had the same lunch he'd had the last time at The Hut, the same lunch he'd had the last time with Mary Lou. Then he drove back over to the produce stand.

"Hi there, Riley, back for more?" Willa Sue asked.

"Yeah, need more turnip greens." Several bunches drooped over the end of the counter top.

"Those there just came in this morning. Pick what suits you."

Face down in front of Willa Sue was another book: Stephen King's *The Stand*. Riley had read it before Mary Lou came, during a macabre time of not being particularly interested in female company. A killer man-made virus gets loose from a secret U.S. biological warfare laboratory and quickly wipes out all of humanity except for a few lucky folks who somehow are immune. The survivors converge from all across America into two sides: good versus evil. Evil is led by a demon incarnated into something resembling human form with a rather fearsome penis. It also sometimes takes on other grisly forms that due justice to author King's standards. Even so, as always happens in the King books Riley has read, the good guys miraculously snatch their defeat out of the jaws of the bad guys' victory, when a disgruntled bad guy sets off a nuclear device in the middle of the demon spirit's command center—Las Vegas, Nevada.

The book is hard cover. As was *Bridges of Madison County*, Riley now recalls. "That's a mighty gruesome book you have there, Willa Sue. Where in the dickens did you find it?"

"Aw, it ain't that bad, Riley. You ought to read some of Mr. King's other stuff."

"I *have* read some of his other stuff, but that one took the cake for me."

"Please don't tell me nothin' 'bout it. I like to be s'prised."

"Sure, but you didn't say where you got it."

"Oh. It was at the public library up in Tallahassee. Go up there every Wednesday, usually. Get two or three books."

"That's a lot of reading."

"I've got lots of time to read."

"I read once that a fellow named Samuel Clements..."

"Mark Twain?"

"Yeah, Mark Twain. He said that the only way to live more than one life is to read books written by other people."

"Well, I been havin' myself a whole bunch of lives then, 'cause I read books all the time."

"You ever think about writing one yourself?"

"Me? What would I write a book about? I never did nothin' nobuddy would ever want to read about." The sad look on her face affirmed her dreary life.

Riley smiled inside. If his plan works out, Willa Sue is going to have something happen that plenty of people might want to read about. And it won't be any made up story like Stephen King writes, instead of admitting he is crazy and full of demons and writing directly about that. No way could he invent such horror stories, unless the monsters are already in him. Didn't take someone who's seen just about every kind of human personality imaginable in his law practice, and some personalities that aren't imaginable, to know this about Stephen King. Circumstantial evidence is just as admissible in the courtroom of life as it is in the courtroom of law.

Meaning, it isn't lost on Riley that his plans for Willa Sue indicate that he is the most wonderful man alive and worse even than the demon spirit in *The Stand*. How delicious and ridiculous, Samuel Clements might say, were he here to speak today.

"You like to gamble, Willa Sue?" Riley asked.

"Sometimes I go to the dog track over at Ebro with my brothers. Bet a little. Sometimes I win, but not usually. I mostly like watching the dogs try to ketch the steel rabbit. Once even saw one ketch it. Shocked that poor dog. Knocked him flat on his back. My brother Jake was mighty upset over that. That was the dog he had bet to win. My brother Harlan liked it just fine, though. The dog that won was the dog he'd bet on."

"Ever play the lottery?"

"Oh, we all do that around here. Buy tickets at the stores. Nobuddy wins, tho. Well, not the big one. We win small ones in the lotto machines in the stores. But we pay out more than we get back."

"Mary Lou won the big one before she died."

"Really?"

"Yeah, it was when she was coming back from claiming it that she had the car wreck and got herself killed."

"Why, that's the worst luck I ever heard tell of!"

"Yeah, I guess you could say that."

"How much did she win?"

"Fourteen million dollars."

Willa Sue's jaw dropped. Just like Mary Lou's jaw had dropped when

Riley said he didn't think she should go in and claim the prize. It was eerie how much they resembled each other.

"Now I have the money. Nearly \$120,000 a month for ten years."

Will Sue's mouth dropped again.

"I'll give it all to you, Willa Sue, if you will get in my car and leave with me and stay with me for one year, and don't tell anyone. Then you can do what you want after that."

"Why, I nevah!!!!" The look of righteous indignation seemed more automatic than authentic. Like a computer program.

Undaunted, Riley continued. "I'm going to be dead honest. You look just like Mary Lou, only a lot bigger. After she died, she came to me and told me she would be with me forever. I was insane at the time, from grief. I was drinking myself stupid. I couldn't take care of myself. I didn't know what was going on. I was put into a hospital where crazy people are kept. It was when I was in there that Mary Lou came to me and told me she would never leave me. Right after that, I came out of it, like by magic. The doctor was surprised, didn't want me to leave. But he let me out after I put up a bit of a fuss. I'm a trial lawyer, the kind of lawyer John Grisham likes to write about in his books that I bet you like to read, don't you?"

"Yeah, I like his books. But they don't seem real a lot of the time. I don't think those kinds of things really happen that he writes about. I think he makes them up."

"Well, so does Stephen King make things up."

"But his made up things are so made up that any dummy can see they are made up. Some dummies might believe Mr. Grisham don't make up his stories. Or don't make them up all the way."

"Shoot, Mary Lou, er, Willa Sue, what's the difference between making up a story and writing about it, and making up something to do and doing it, like going to the dog track and betting, or going to the store and betting on the lottery, or standing here talking with me and getting propositioned? Who in the name of God would ever believe you, if you told them what is happening between the two of us right now?"

"My brothers sure wouldn't believe it, unless they hear'd it. They'd laugh their fool heads off if I went home en told them about it. So would my ma and pa. So would everbuddy I know."

"Do you believe Mary Lou won the lottery, Willa Sue?"

"Maybe she did, maybe she didn't. Can't say, 'cause I ain't got no proof of it. All I got is your word. En if you're a lawyer, then I don't imagine that's worth much."

"My word? That's what's not worth much?"

"Yeah."

"You got a good point there, Willa Sue. Now how can I convince you that Mary Lou won the lottery?"

"Well, you ken call your bank and maybe they can prove it on the telephone."

"Excuse me for a moment," Riley said, and walked over to his car and got out his cell phone. Walking back to Willa Sue, he dialed directory assistance and asked for the customer service extension of AmSouth Bank in Birmingham. On being given the number and having it automatically dialed for fifty cents, he by-passed all the listed options and punched the real person option. When a Mrs. Peterson finally came on the line, Riley gave his name, social security number and birth date, and asked her to state the largest deposit into this checking account for each of the previous three months.

"I'm showing wire transfers into your account of \$119,447 in each of those months, Mr. Strange. Those are the largest credits for each of those months."

"Thank you, Mrs. Peterson. Now would you mind letting me put someone else on this phone and you tell her that, too? Her name is Willa Sue..."

"Jenkins. Willa Sue Jenkins," Riley.

"Willa Sue Jenkins, Mrs. Peterson. Now I'm handing her this cell phone and she will say when she's on it."

Riley handed it over to Willa Sue. "Go ahead, tell her you are on the line."

"This is Willa Sue Jenkins, Mrs. Peterson."

"I hear you, Mrs. Jenkins."

"It's *Miss* Jenkins."

"Okay. Miss Jenkins, the largest credits into Mr. Strange's account in each of the past three months was \$119,447."

"What does that mean, credits?"

"It means that was what was deposited into the account. These deposits came from another bank, according to our records."

"Just a minute, Mrs. Peterson. I have to ask Mr. Strange something."

Turning to Riley, she asked, "What is the name of the bank where the money for the lottery comes from?"

"SouthTrust Bank."

Willa Sue spoke into the mouth piece, "Mrs. Peterson, did those deposits come from SouthTrust Bank?"

"Yes, that is what is shown on my records."

"Thank you. Here's Mr. Strange."

Riley took the cell phone and thanked Mrs. Peterson, then broke the connection.

"Satisfied?"

Willa Sue nodded.

"What do you do with all that money, Riley?"

"I put it somewhere safe, for later."

"Where is that?"

"That and anything else you want to know I will gladly tell you, but only if you accept my offer. And there is one condition to that offer. No, two conditions."

"What do you mean by conditions."

"Conditions are requirements."

"What are they, Riley?"

"You can't tell anyone else for the one year, or even talk to anyone else but me. And you have to leave with me now."

"You got to be kiddin' me." This time, Willa Sue's affect is genuine. Not a computer program.

"Fuck," Riley thought. "That is exactly what Mary Lou said when he told her to forget about claiming the prize. And about the same look of disbelief. Either Willa Sue goes along with me in this way, or I'll find another way for her to go along."

Riley shrugged, said, "I'm not kidding, Willa Sue. In fact, I've never been more serious in my entire life about anything...except Mary Lou."

"You really loved her, didn't you, Riley?"

"More than I loved myself."

"You want to replace her with me?"

"I want to try to do that. And if it doesn't work out that way, in a year you can do whatever you like."

"Mr. Grisham would make up a lawyer in this book that's happening here today, who'd say to me, don't believe anything you tell me until I have the money in my paws."

"Yep," Riley agreed, "and any real lawyer I know would tell you the very same thing. As would your brothers and ma and pa, and everyone else you know. But you're not going to get the money first. If I give you the money first, then what will hold you to your side of the agreement?"

"And if you keep the money, what'll hold you to your side of it?" she rejoined.

"This will hold me to it." Riley reached into his wallet and pulled out a photo of Mary Lou. Handed it to Willa Sue, whose eyebrows raised when she saw the likeness. She looked at Riley, back at the photo.

"She *was* beautiful."

Riley nodded, reached for the photo and took out his pen and wrote on the back:

*If Willa Sue Jenkins
goes away with me for one year
and keeps it just to herself,
then she becomes the legal owner
of Mary Lou Snow's lottery winnings,
so help me God.*

Riley Strange 17 May 2001

Riley handed the photo back to Willa Sue, said, "This is a legal contract. Any lawyer in the world would love to try to enforce it for a piece of what he wins. Especially, would a lawyer like to do it in this case, with so much money being involved, with a lawyer defendant being involved, and with an innocent country girl plaintiff the jury would sympathize with. The district attorney would also love to get involved, get me indicted for kidnapping under false pretenses, put me away for life most likely, in some maximum security federal prison where men a lot bigger than me would try to make a little girl of me the very first night I arrived there. Then there would be the book and movie rights you would make even more millions on. John Grisham would be put to shame. And so would Stephen King. You'd be famous all over the world, instead of sitting down here in Apalachicola peddling produce and reading books about things that never even happened to anybody."

"Where would I keep this contract, if I agree to it, so that it would be safe?"

"Get a post office box and pay for it for a year in advance and mail the contract to yourself."

When the year is up, go and get the contract and get yourself a lawyer, if I didn't do what I promised."

"How do I know you won't hurt me or sumtin'?" she asked.

Riley smiled, said, "How do I know *you* won't hurt me or something? You're bigger than me by about seventy-five pounds, I figure."

"As you say, you got a point there." Willa Sue smiled in kind.

"You ever been with a man before, as a woman?" Riley asked.

"Yes, long time ago. Didn't amount to much."

"How long ago?"

"When I was in high school."

"Were you this large then?"

"You ask a lot of personal questions, mister."

"Yeah, and I'm offering to make you very rich and perhaps you will get something a lot better than that even."

"Like what, Riley?"

"Like being in love with me, dummy."

"Oh." Now her look is shy. Real.

"Well, what do you say, Willa Sue? Want to roll the dice big time for a change. Play a lottery you can't lose, if you don't bail out?"

"I bet you win a heap of trials."

"I win most of them. Juries can't resist me. I'm charmed."

"I bet you make a lot of money in them trials."

"Right again. But that's going to stop. I've done all of that I care to do. It's time to have myself another life."

"What kind of another life, Riley?"

"It would start with you, if you agree. Otherwise, I'll just have to figure out some other way for it to start."

Willa Sue's gaze held his, did not waver.

"I just up and leave, don't tell nobody?"

"That's right."

"People will think something bad happened to me."

"Probably. But if you tell people, they will try to talk you out of it."

"Yep, they shore would do that."

"Say you're crazy."

"That, too."

"Say I'm a bad man."

"That, too."

"Look at that photograph, Willa Sue. Look at Mary Lou. Do you think she would have loved a bad man?"

"How do I know for sure that's her, or that she really was with you?"

Riley pulled out the cell phone again and hit the auto redial for AmSouth Bank. When he had a Miss Browning on the other end, he asked if she had any record of his and Mary Lou's joint checking account: that was the account into which she had instructed that lottery proceeds be paid. Riley gave Miss. Browning his social security card number and birth date, and the approximate dates and amounts of the last transaction.

"Yes, Mr. Strange, we have that joint account. It's now closed."

After speaking with Miss Browning, Willa Sue asked Riley if she could see his driver's license, and his Social Security card if he had it with him. He did. He also had several credit cards, one in his and Mary Lou's names he had not yet thrown away.

"Well, Riley, I guess you and Mary Lou were a thing. But do I want to be her for you?"

"Do you?"

"I can't be her for you. She's dead. But I can be me for you."

"That's all I can ask."

"I want you to know why I'm gonna do this, Riley. It's because I don't want to end up like that poor woman did in *Bridges of Madison County*, spending the rest of my life wondering if I messed up by turning you down. That would be worse than any life I could imagine having, worse than anything Stephen King might dream up to write."

Riley is stunned. Inside Willa Sue is something beautiful and true. The outside is the problem he will have to fix. Or the inside will never have a chance to do more than sell produce and live vicariously through other people's stories. Mary Lou kept her promise: she is with him forever. Now he must keep *his* promise.

The Fine Print

All this time not another living soul came to the produce stand, and the coast was still clear when Willa Sue squeezed herself into the passenger's side of Riley's Jeep Cherokee. She had put the keys to her brother Harlan's pick-up under the floor mat, where he always left them, along with a scribbled note:

Hi, I'm gonna be gone on an adventure for bout a year and you won't be able to find me so no point in tryin. Tell everbody goodbye for me.

Love

Willa Sue

Riley had agreed when Willa Sue argued that she needed to leave them something, or they would raise a hue and cry and a photo of her would be on every television news program in the southeast. All she brought with her were her purse and *The Stand*. What a stand she was making, against everything in her world until just a few moments before. Riley couldn't help but admire that.

They went straight to the state park and packed up. Then to Panama City, straight to the main post office Riley found after asking directions in a convenience store on the east side of town. After filling out the application and giving the postal clerk the yearly fee in cash provided by Riley, Willa Sue dropped a U.S postal pre-stamped envelope addressed to herself in the in-town box outside the post office and returned to the jeep.

"That's that," she said. "Now what?"

(That's what the scribe now also wonders...)

After getting more directions, Riley found the Walmart. Willa Sue needed extra clothes, and he wanted to get them where he most likely would not be recognized. As far as he knew, no one in Panama City knew him personally, besides a lawyer with whom he had tried a case in Birmingham about ten years previously. Not much chance of them meeting again in Walmart at this time of day. Not much chance of that lawyer meeting anybody in Walmart, unless it had something to do with one of the lawyer's cases. That lawyer would go anywhere to win a case, even Walmart. Nothing wrong with Walmart; it was the lawyer something was wrong with: Riley never did get paid in that case, even though they won it.

Willow Sue read more of *The Stand* during the drive north. Five rather quiet hours later they reached Riley's home in south Hoover below Birmingham. Eight o'clock, it was just dark. In the middle of twenty-five wooded acres, the house was invisible to the highway and neighbors during the day. A

feeder stream to the Cahaba River ran through the back part of the property.

Beside the river was their gymnasium. Or rather, Riley's gymnasium now. Nautilus machines. Two stairmasters. Two exercycles. Two tread mills. A padded floor mat for yoga and floor exercises. A balance bar on a wood section of floor, backed by a full-length mirror. It was where they had worked out and taken steam and whirlpool, then bathed under the two-headed shower. Beside the commode was a douche.

No windows for privacy, wide skylights invite in the trees growing around the gym, and the heavens. An entrance hall, for shoes and outer garments. A solid wooden door inside and a metal one outside, secured by dead-bolt locks that take the same key. Reinforced concrete block construction with overlapping cedar boards outside match the house. Willa Sue's new home until she shapes up. "Now how to get her into it, before she bolts and runs away screaming to high heaven and getting me arrested for kidnapping under false pretenses?" Riley wonders to himself.

"I think all the photos of Mary Lou ought to go, if we are to make a go of this hair-brained notion of yours," Willa Sue said right away, when they went into the house. Otherwise, she seemed to like it and the bedroom Riley said was hers for now. It looked out to the north of the house, over a meadow into the woods. "The woods remind me of our place in Appalach," she said. "I mean, my family's place."

"That's still your place," Riley said softly. "Until you are decided. I'm going to shower and change clothes. Your bathroom is over there on the other side of the bed."

As he made to leave, she said, "I get to sleep alone if I want to?"

"Of course."

"Oh, I wondered if maybe I'd agreed to not sleep alone."

"I'm not into that kind of arrangement. You decide when you don't sleep alone. And I decide when I don't sleep alone. I never once looked at another woman when I was with Mary Lou, and haven't looked at one in that way since she died. Don't know if I can ever look at a woman in that way again."

"Oh, I didn't know," Willa Sue said. "I thought all men looked at women in that way."

"They do. I did. I got changed. Can't explain it. Raquel Welch couldn't arouse me if I didn't care a lot for her."

"You ain't like my brothers."

"I'm not like any other man I know, Willow Sue. I'm leaving now, to shower. Then I'm going to check my emails and phone messages, and probably call it a night. If you need anything to eat or drink, there's whole wheat crackers, tuna fish and stuff in the kitchen pantry, and frozen fruit juices in the refrigerator freezer. Not much else now. Grocery shop tomorrow."

"Okay. 'Nite, then."

After showering, Riley wrote an email to Ronnie, saying he was back but would be a couple of days getting in to the office. In the meantime, Ronnie might want to be thinking about who in the firm might want to take over the cases his soon-to-be retired friend and law partner was now handling. "A new profession—writing—now awaits," Riley concluded the email, "and I need to get shed of my other responsibilities ASAP and go into semi-isolation and get to it."

He next typed this letter.

Dear Willa Sue,

I hate deceit, and I especially hate being deceitful. But I must do this, even though we never discussed it and I knew all along I was going to do it.

Where you are now is your home for one year, or until you weigh one-half of what you now weigh. You will not leave here before then. You will be fed mid-morning and at sundown each day. Your clothes will be washed and pressed, as needed. You will be given toiletries, wash rags, towels and so forth. You will have suitable clothes for working out and hanging out. You will have all the books you wish to read, but no television shows. The television is not hooked up for TV. We used it only for exercise videos. You can watch all the exercise videos you like, and once a day you can watch a movie I will get for you.

You can make this easy or hard for us both, by how you behave when I come to the door to get inside with food, supplies, videos and so forth. I assure you I will be prepared for the worst sort of reaction from you, and will not attempt to enter the room if I believe you are going to attack me or try to escape. If once I am inside, you try to escape, I will try to prevent it without harming you.

No one but me knows where you are. A sealed letter will be given to someone I trust with my life, to open in the event something happens to me. The letter will tell him about you, our agreement and where you are. A key to this room will be in that letter, in case the key I use is unavailable to that person. He knows where I live and will have no problem getting here quickly. He also knows I will kill him (not really) if he opens the letter out of curiosity. So you cannot expect him to rescue you. Only you can rescue you.

You can look upon this unexpected turn of events as betrayal of the worst kind. Or you can view it as a great gift: the new life you said you wanted to enter, instead of staying in the one you had. I can not begin to imagine how you are feeling right now about this prison you have been unwittingly cast into for a year or perhaps less. Nor can you imagine what it was like for me to suddenly lose my beloved wife, which is its own prison. Your prison is of limited duration; mine might be for the rest of my life.

I believe you have within you what it takes to be victorious, but before today you lacked the opportunity to win. I believe you have done nothing wrong in being here, but to the contrary, you are actually doing something brave and beautiful in making this stand to better yourself, even if there is nothing in it in the end for me. I also believe that, if this is an evil thing I do, then God will surely take me to task for it.

I will check in with you two hours after I leave you locked in here today, and we will go from there.

Riley.

Under pretense of showing Willa Sue the exercise room, "where you can exercise off some of your weight if you like," Riley got her to go in ahead of him. As soon as she was inside the second door, he said he had forgotten something in the house and would be right back. She might take a look around. He had left the key in the lock, and when she walked further in to explore, he pulled out the letter from his pocket and dropped it onto the floor, as he closed the inner door and locked it. Then he closed and locked the outer door. Then he waited.

It was a loud blood-chilling scream, but with the insulated glass and heavy walls, it might not have been heard at his house fifty yards away.

ACT II

The Odd Couple

Kamikaze

Two hours after locking Willa Sue up, Riley stands in the entry to the gym with her breakfast on a tray. He has been to the grocery store. Breakfast is old-fashioned Quaker oatmeal with raisins, toasted sunflower seeds, sliced banana, brown sugar and ghee, and a whole orange, scored by knife for easy peeling. Riley has already brought to the entry two cardboard boxes from the grocery store, containing Willa Sue's spare clothes and purse, and soap and shampoo, tooth paste and brush, wash rags and towels, toilet paper, paper towels, two sets of plastic knives, forks and spoons, two plastic drinking glasses, and some brown paper grocery bags for trash.

Riley sets the tray of food on top of one of the cardboard boxes and knocks on the door.

Nothing.

He knocks again.

Nothing.

"I have your breakfast and a bunch of things you are going to need. Let me know if you want any of it. I need to hear you say it, Willa Sue."

Nothing.

"Okay. I'll just leave it all out here and I'll be back this evening." Nothing.

Riley goes back to the house and gets online. An email from Ronnie.

Amigo,

Am not surprised by your decision. When can we get together face-to-face? I can come to your place after work. Might do me good to get out of suburbia.

Told the others you are pulling out. They be working on that. Don't expect no problems. The cases you settled lately brought in enough dinero to settle up with you nice and quick. Not that you need more, but you certainly earned it and I and the other banditos here are lucky sons of bitches.

I'm not just talking here about money. I'm talking about you, man. One of a kind. A rich experience for us all. You ought to be able to write a hell of a book or two, or three, out of that deep well, for better and for worse.

It's just my own personal opinion, but I think Mary Lou was the lucky one, to have you. If another one like her comes along, she will be the lucky one too.

Ronnie

Riley wants to weep. Does. Then he emails Ronnie and says he will come into town at noon tomorrow, and for Ronnie to hold that time open for lunch and such.

Then Riley switches into WestLaw, to bring himself up to legal speed.

Listed are four kinds of *kidnapping*: (a) for ransom or reward, or as a shield or hostage; (b) to facilitate commission of a felony or flight thereafter; (c) *to inflict bodily injury on or to terrorize the victim or someone else*; or (d) to interfere with the performance of any governmental or political function. *The unlawful taking by force or fraud or threats or intimidation and against the victim's will being the essential elements. A felony.* "Guilty as charged, Your Honor," Riley confesses. Then he pulls up an old letter to the State Bar to get the address for a new letter:

Dear Alabama State Bar,

For a variety of reasons, I have decided to retire from the practice of law. Enclosed is my current law license, which I surrender herewith, reserving only the right to settle up financially with my law firm: Davis & Strange, P.C., in Birmingham. A buy-out of my partnership interest should conclude within the next thirty days.

I have earned 7 of the 12 required Continuing Legal Education hours, one credit hour for each month in this fiscal year. Inasmuch as I will not practice law after this day, I hope those seven hours will suffice for this year.

Sincerely yours,

Riley Strange

He then drafts a long letter to Ronnie, explaining all that happened since he left on his vacation. The letter ends,

In sum, Willa Sue Jenkins is now the owner of the tainted lotto funds, subject to reversion back to me if she fails to honor her side of the bargain. Inasmuch as you, Ronnie, are still my courtappointed legal guardian and executor under my will, you have the legal power and authority to execute any documents a bank or securities firm might need to have executed, to facilitate transfer of the poisoned fruit to Willa Sue, should I die or become incapacitated in the meantime.

Now amigo, if by some fluke or natural curiosity you are reading this letter for a reason not outlined in it, then a pox on your mouth and pen so that they cannot speak of it, under penalty of a receiving a long-line of bitchy whinny clients who call and nag you 24-7 for the rest of your natural life. Would serve you right for playing God. Yeah, the pot just called the kettle black.

Next, Riley writes to SouthTrust Bank.

Dear Sirs:

This is to inform you that on May 17, 2001, Willa Sue Jenkins became the owner, by virtue of gift from me to her, of my inherited interest in the lottery payout to my deceased wife, Mary Lou Snow. This advisory to you was delayed for various reasons personal to Miss Jenkins and myself.

Henceforth, you are authorized to pay over to her or to her direction all proceeds in the aforementioned lottery account. If for some reason you need further documentation to effectuate this change over in payees, and if I am unable or unavailable to execute said documents, then they will be executed by William Ronald Davis, Esquire, of the law firm Davis

& Strange, P.C., in Birmingham, in his capacity as my executor or guardian.

Thanking you, I am

Very truly yours,

Riley Strange

Riley pulls a legal-size envelope from the file drawer in the credenza and puts into it the signed letters to Ronnie and SouthTrust Bank, and a spare key to the gym, which is also keyed to fit the locks on the doors to his home. Another set of the same two letters he puts into a second envelope, on the outside of which he writes "Riley Strange and Willa Sue Jenkins." That envelope he seals and places into a file folder on which he writes "Jenkins/Strange, then puts it into a file drawer marked "Riley Strange: Personal Matters."

The next order of business is to call his stockbroker, Jeff Ballentine, to get an offshore contact. Jeff and Riley also go back to childhood. Riley sometimes makes money off Jeff's recommendations, and sometimes he doesn't. When he doesn't, it is usually because he grew impatient and sold before Jeff wanted him to sell. But then, sometimes Jeff estimates a year to hold a stock after buying it, but the remunerative event Jeff looks for to happen and drive the stock up turns out to take two years. About one year is all Riley has in it to wait on an investment. That's why he gave Willa Sue just one year.

Jeff recommends Tortola over the Cayman Islands. Seems the Cayman bankers are rather susceptible to U.S. law enforcement bribes in exchange for the names, account numbers and money balances and deposits into accounts held by Americans. Whereas, Tortolan bankers hold loyal to their American clients' trust. Riley and Mary Lou spent a few weeks in Tortola once upon a time, and had liked its British influence and mountainous terrain more than the more beach-like and American-influenced Caymans. So Riley calls a Tortolan banker recommended by Jeff, to initiate opening an account there. He plans to reroute the SouthTrust payments there, into a joint account, survivor take all, for Willa Sue and himself. The banker says either of them will be able to draw down the account, and Riley feels secure in that, because Willa Sue will not know how to access the account until their year together is up.

The Tortolan faxes the forms right away. Riley fills them out for himself and signs where the x's indicate. That leaves only Willa Sue's vital statistics and signature to be had. The banker had said he could open the account and receive funds over faxed copies, but would need a signed original to authorize fund withdrawals. He had also said it usually took three to five days for mail to reach Tortola from the eastern U.S. Seaboard, and five to seven days from the West Coast. Riley got the sense that the banker had many American clients. His ancestors were British slaves whose descendants now are the dominant culture throughout the Caribbean and who receive more education in high school than do most University of Alabama students.

After dealing with the banker's forms, Riley turns on CNN and watches the news for a while. No bulletins on Willa Sue being abducted. Nor online, when he checks there. "Imagine her family doesn't know what to do yet. Maybe they're glad she's gone. Maybe they hope never to hear from her again," Riley muses. "Yeah, right. And maybe Willa Sue is going to be all peaches and cream when I go out there this afternoon. I bet old Doctor Stakely would leap outta his skin to know what he's turned loose on the world."

Riley is then moved to pull his dictionary from the top shelf of the credenza. The first definition of kamikaze is the American point of view: a Japanese aircraft loaded with explosives

piloted to make a suicide attack. The second definition is the Japanese point of view: *kami*, God + *kaze*, wind = divine wind. That's what Riley thinks he remembers hearing somewhere back in his other life. He also thinks he remembers from his other life that *tortola* in Spanish, or Latin perhaps, means dove.

"This shit's getting deep, Old Boy. Real deep. And this just the very first day of my Creation. Do you suppose God ever feels this way about His inventions? Er, sorry Mary Lou. I just can't bring myself to say "His/ Her" or "It" when I talk about The Boss. Too much sexist redneck still left in me to do that. If you'd hung around a bit longer, no telling what gender I might be calling God by today. Oh, you say that when you think of a dove or a rainbow, you sure as hell don't conjure up a deity wearing a penis or testicles? You know, you've got a good point there, Wife."

Will

Riley debates cooking a nice healthy dinner for Willa Sue, then decides against it. Any weakness on his part will start them off on the wrong foot. As a green lawyer, he began cases by offering reasonable concessions to the other side, figuring the other side was also reasonable. Then he spent the rest of the case trying to regain the leverage he had given away, leverage the other side fought tooth and nail to not give back to him.

Thus did Riley learn the hard way never to initiate concessions, but always to wait out the other side; then bargain from strength when they made the first settlement offer. His counter offer was always considerably above their first offer, which forced the other side to make yet another offer, to which he made yet another high counter offer. This chipping way continued, with Riley never offering something the other side would take. Eventually the other side faced making yet another higher offer, or go to trial. Going to trial against Riley was viewed as a kamikaze move by most defense lawyers, and not one loaded with any bombs aboard that would do Riley or his client much harm. In most cases, this defense viewpoint resulted in an offer being made that suited Riley, such as the \$200,000 offer made in the rail-road-crossing death case he didn't figure he had a chance of winning.

Riley never came to believe this is how people ought to behave with each other, but he came to believe this is how they *do* behave with each other and so that is how he also had to behave. So at five o'clock that evening, he walks out to the gym empty-handed, except for the letters he wrote earlier in the day.

This time when he knocks, in a few seconds Willa Sue knocks back.

"Are you hungry?" he asks.

"Bastard!"

"Yes, that is agreed. But are you hungry?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to eat your breakfast now?"

"Breakfast?"

"Yes, it's been sitting out here on the bench all day. That's all there is. Do you want it?"

"Bastard!"

"Willa Sue, you can't eat words. Do you want to eat this food or not?"

"Fuck you!"

"I'll come back in the morning. Maybe by then you'll be hungry enough to eat it. In the meantime, here are some things I wrote today, which prove I'm keeping up my end of our agreement."

"Keep your Goddamn writings. Let me outta here!"

"Sorry, no can do."

"Riley, please just take me back down to home, en we just ken forgit the whole damn thing!"

"Can't do that either, Willa Sue. Mary Lou wouldn't like for me to do that. And I made myself a promise not to ever make Mary Lou mad again."

"You're crazy, Riley."

"You'd better hope I'm not, lady. You'd better hope I'm not. You sure you don't want to eat this food?"

"Go fuck yourself!"

"Now that's a thought. I'll go study on how I might do that, and leave you to study on whatever you want to study on until I come back in the morning," he said, sliding the papers through the small space between the bottom of the inner door and the wooden floor. Willa Sue's scream is a bit louder than the one last night.

She has access to water to drink, and the toilets and shower. Towels and wash rags hang on the towel racks beside the shower, and soap is on the sink and in the shower. The heat/cool thermostat on the wall just inside the inner door means she isn't going to freeze or roast. The sun and moon and stars shine down through the sky lights, so she isn't going to be deprived of day and night. The digital clock on the wall shows the time, so she isn't going to wonder what time it is. The CD player has a radio, so she isn't isolated from human voices and goings on.

Most prison inmates would view these digs and the promised fringe benefits as heaven on earth. Great food twice a day. A chance to get into great physical shape. Privacy and protection from various forms of abuse. Cool in summer, warm in winter. A constant view of the sky. Interesting books to read and a new movie each night, and radio at any hour desired. A competent lawyer to talk to about legal matters and anything else that strikes their fancy. And \$14,000,000 and freedom in one year's time, no matter what. Even most people on the street would view these digs and the fringe benefits in that way. But not Willa Sue.

This is not the first time she has been "locked up." Her parents had her locked up when she was twelve. They had her locked up because she said Harlan was having sex with her. Good Baptists, no way in God's green earth could a son of theirs have sex with his own sister. Why, he was a bright lad in Sunday school. He could quote the Bible better than most grown ups, even though he was only fourteen years old.

The doctor appointed by the judge said Willa Sue's hymen was gone, but whether it was from having sex with someone, or with an object of some kind, he couldn't tell. That was what everybody was saying: she did it to herself, then blamed Harlan. She was always jealous of him, their folks said to the doctor and judge. Tried to get him into trouble all the time, ever since she was big enough to try to get someone into trouble. Never did act like Harlan or Jake. Didn't want to do her chores, wanted to just read, be out in the woods. And she talked a lot to herself, they said. Or to something.

Other witnesses said much the same thing about Willa Sue. She was strange. Wasn't like a normal person. Was more interested in things nobody else could understand, than in what good white Baptist folks were interested in. The judge was Catholic, and his view of women and sex, although not as skewed as that of the Pope, was nevertheless biased toward the male side of the spectrum. Eve *was* the problem, no doubt about that. And poor Adam had paid for it ever since. The judge was suspicious of any woman who made a man out to be evil, and while he was capable of siding with a woman in a divorce case, the proof he required was far more stringent than the proof that naturally enabled him to side with the man.

In this case, the judge sided against Willa Sue, since the proof was against her. He ordered that she be sent away for psychiatric evaluation in the state psychiatric hospital outside of Tallahassee, since she was, according to the evidence, demonstrating signs of mental illness: making up bad stories about her brother, talking to herself and imaginary beings, not being like everyone else, and so forth.

Willa Sue then spent nearly three months in what, for her, was hell on earth. She couldn't sleep. The medicine they gave, to "help you relax," gave her the runny legs. She paced the ward like a tiger. Only after she begged in tears until one or two in the morning, did they relent and give her a single tranquilizer. Then she got three-to-four hours sleep, before they woke everybody up at six-thirty. Breakfast at seven. Activities after that, or television. Willa Sue paced.

They got to go outside once a day, for an hour. A caged yard. Nothing to do but stand around and talk. Willa Sue paced.

During the third week of this, her psyche began to reconvert the stress in her body back into her emotions and mind. She started feeling as if she was losing her breath and was leaving her body. When she told this to one of the nurses on the ward, she was sent to the doctor. The doctor said she needed more medication. Willa Sue said she needed to be sent home, or to somewhere else, where she could be free. She wasn't crazy but this place and the drugs were making her crazy.

The doctor said she was being helped, she would get better. Willa Sue burst into tears. The doctor couldn't get her to stop crying. When he tried to "shake some sense into her," Willa Sue went berserk, hauled off and punched him in the nose as hard as she could. Now the doctor looked like Harlan, and finally she was getting the bastard back. When the doctor grabbed for his nose, which hurt like hell and made his eyes water, Willa Sue kicked him in the shin. Then she turned and fled out into the hall, screaming hysterically. She screamed until the drugs they gave her shut her up.

They put her into the bubble, a padded cell with a thick door in which is fitted a round peephole of very thick glass. The glass distorts what is seen in the cell from the outside, and what is seen of the outside from within the cell. That is why it is called the bubble. Troublemakers are put into the bubble, to get them to not be troublemakers. They stay there until they promise to behave.

Willa Sue was in the bubble for three days. It took that long for her to break down all the way, give up. Mercifully, when she gave up she forgot everything Harlan had done to her since she was nine years old. She forgot being examined by the doctor, being before the judge, hearing what everyone had said bad about her. She forgot coming to the mental facility. She forgot attacking the doctor. She quit pacing, was able to sleep.

The doctor knew sleeplessness and runny legs often are side effects of

Prolixin, the anti-psychotic he had used on Willa Sue. He also knew spontaneous outbreaks of rage sometimes help patients. He also knew that just because a judge says someone was not raped by her brother does not mean she was not raped by her brother. He also knew being raped by your brother can cause serious psychiatric problems. Yet that alone would not have caused the doctor to treat Willa Sue differently. What caused that was the doctor had a dream while Willa Sue was in the bubble. In the dream, a man stood beside Willa Sue. The man was the doctor's pharmacology instructor in medical school. The man said, "The drugs you are giving Willa Sue are causing her problems. Leave off the drugs and she will get better. Then she can go home."

Had the man in the dream said that Willa Sue had been raped by her brother Harlan, the doctor would have believed that as well, and would not have signed the release two months later into the custody of her parents. No, the doctor would have kept Willa Sue in the facility, fearing for her safety if he released her to her family, and fearing for his reputation if he tried to have her put into a foster home, to get her away from Harlan. Who would give credence to a mere dream, in a profession based on science? Who would override a judge's solemn ruling, on a mere dream? And what would become of a doctor who did something like that, based on a mere dream?

The Dream Maker dealt with these problems by giving Willa Sue's brother Harlan a dream. In the dream, Batman stood before Harlan and said, "God came to me in a dream last night and told me what you did to Willa Sue. God said that if you do it again, then God will let me know in a dream and I will make sure that your parents and the police learn of it and that you will be sent to prison, where men a lot bigger than me will do to you every night what you did to Willa Sue. God also told me that He gave this same dream to Willa Sue in the mental place." Batman was Harlan's childhood comic book hero.

When Willa Sue came home, Harlan was scared to death she was going to tell. But she just looked at him like nothing had happened. In fact, she had not had the same dream as Harlan, and she didn't remember a thing about why she was sent to the mental place. By now she was getting fat, and in a few months she would be really fat. Her family didn't know what to make of that, since none of them were fat. Nor did they know what to make of how Willa Sue acted like she didn't know anything about why she had been in the mental place. But she wasn't causing any problems, and that was enough to cause them all to leave her be.

It had taken Riley's own inner demons and will power to make Willa Sue start to remember during the second night she is in the gym, when she is hungry, enraged and terrified. Then all hell really does break loose in the bubble. But this time, it's not Riley that Willa Sue wants to kill. It's

Harlan and her parents, the other people who said all those bad things about her, the judge who didn't believe her, the people in the mental place who gave her the drugs, the doctor who put her in the bubble, and God for letting it all happen.

Willa Sue is damn glad to hear Riley knock on the door the third morning. She is starving and raring to beat it back down to Apalachicola to straighten out her life.

And in This Corner

Riley spent most of yesterday squirming with two conflicting lines of thought. On the one hand, if he had been more firm with Mary Lou, like he is now being firm with Willa Sue, maybe Mary Lou would not have driven down to Montgomery. On the other hand, if he had been more firm, maybe she would have asked for a divorce before driving down to Montgomery. She had seemed mad enough to do just that, if pushed just a wee bit harder. Yet when he fell asleep, it seemed Riley's dream maker was concerned about something else: he again had the Port St. Joe dream of hooking the jack crevalle and believing he had tied into a world record pompano.

As he came out of the dream at dawn, he lay quietly, pondering. "What's the message?" Then his mind drifted to his and Mary Lou's first encounter in Big Sky Bakery in Mountain Brook, just over the mountain from Birmingham. Mt. Brook is known as The Tiny Kingdom, because it is where the rich people live in a non-reality surrounded by reality. Riley grew up in adjacent Homewood, a middle class section. Mary Lou grew up in Mobile, on the Gulf Coast. Neither grew up rich and neither liked living among rich people, even though they both were now rich people.

A franchise of an outfit in Montana, Big Sky Bakery used fresh ground organic wheat berries to make its bread. A truckload of wheat came in each week, and the bags were stacked in plain view of the customers. As were the flower mills and baking ovens. In Riley's opinion, the bread was superior to any other he had tried, even overseas bread. That was why he was a regular Big Sky customer. That was also why Mary Lou was a Big Sky customer. That is why they were there one fall Saturday morning.

She stood in line ahead of him, paying for her order. He was admiring her backside, when she suddenly turned and was face to face with him, staring at him staring at her. He didn't avert his gaze: the front was also nice. She laughed, then turned and picked up the bag containing her order and handed to him. That threw him off. Then she walked around to his left side, stopped, stared at his profile. Then she walked around behind and stared at his backside. Walking back around to the front, she asked, "You ever give any thought to professional modeling?"

"Professional modeling?"

"You're quite a looker. But you already know that. So why not make the best of it, instead of doing whatever it is you now do for work. Let me guess. You look like you spend a lot of time in the YMCA doing jock stuff. You don't look like you spend a lot of time on a golf course—not tan enough. You're in The Tiny Kingdom, so you probably make a lot of money. Maybe you are some kind of doctor. Or maybe a lawyer. How am I doing?"

"Like a lawyer," Riley said, abashed. Other people in the place had stopped what they were doing, to watch this play out.

"Wrong guess," she chuckled. "You're obviously too flustered to be a lawyer, or at least a good one. Good lawyers never get flustered. Costs them too much money. And doctors don't have enough blood to get flustered. So you must be something else. Keep holding that pose, and I'll probably guess what it is you do when you aren't oggling." Riley's face was flushing.

"Oh, what inconsiderate thing have I done? Poor man, you haven't even placed your order, and all these other people are standing here waiting on us to get out of their way. Why don't you give me back my bread and I'll go outside and we can finish this there?"

"Will I be safe?" Riley asked.

"It's broad daylight out there. Sure you'll be safe from little ole me." Laughter from the other people, as the saucy bitch headed for the door.

Riley turned to the clerk, ordered a couple of blueberry muffins. When he got to where the beautiful maddening woman was waiting on the sidewalk, he offered one of the muffins. "A peace offering, and apology."

"Accepted. I'm Mary Lou, who are you?" Her coal black eyes danced in mirth.

"Riley."

"Riley who? Riley doctor? Riley lawyer? Riley stock broker? Riley accountant? Riley tycoon?"

"Riley Strange."

"You got that right. But then, maybe that's *really* a good thing," she strummed his name immediately, and he wasn't sure she believed his last name really was Strange.

"Okay, I showed you mine, now you show me yours," he said.

"Show you my what?"

"Whatever you want to show me," he grunted, raising his palms upward, signifying surrender.

"Oh, please don't give up. I hate it when that happens!"

"You had lunch?" he tried a different tact.

"No. It's only eleven."

"I know what time it is, but I'm trying to salvage some of my dignity and you are making it rather difficult Mary Lou whoever you are."

"Mary Lou Snow, actually, is whoever I am."

"Snow? Sure it's not really Mary Lou Pummel? Black? Or Vader?"

"I'd love lunch. Where?"

In that moment Riley felt something in his...it wasn't exactly emotion. It wasn't exactly anything he ever before experienced. It was like...maybe a tuning fork humming after being softly pinged by a metal rod. It felt...mildly exquisite, actually. It also caused his back to arch a bit involuntarily, and twist off to the right side.

This she saw. "You okay, Riley?"

Before he could answer, his torso twitched.

"Yeah, I think..." The jerk that followed the twitch cut him off. With effort, he willed his body quiet, nodded "so." What he was unable to will quiet, however, was a rising sense of passion that was slowly and deliciously flooding his entire body.

Her face was puzzled. He was still in the contortion. "You don't look okay. Like it's a muscle spasm."

It now was subsiding. He shook his head. "I've had muscle spasms. This isn't like anything I ever experienced. Something just took me over. It's going away now. Boy, was that strange. I'm *really* hungry now."

"Just name a place and I'll meet you there. *Really*," she said.

"You like Mexican?"

She nodded, watching him closely.

"How about the one just up at the top of the hill over the freeway— Casa de Sol?"

Mary Lou's gaze was piercing. "On second thought, why don't you ride with me and I'll bring you back afterwards. Don't think it would be a *really* good idea for you to be driving and have another one of those spells, don't you agree?"

He agreed.

They quaffed a couple of Dox Equis each with lunch. Told a bit about themselves. She wasn't surprised he was a lawyer, but he was surprised to find out what she did. He was also surprised to find that strange but nice sensation coming and going in him, thankfully without the twitch or spasm. It would be three weeks later that he fully realized that the twitch followed by the spasm signified sexual union was imminent from his side of it. It would take Mary Lou several months to accept Riley's shaking spells as normal, even a compliment to her. As for Riley, he had never had such a physical or feeling response to a woman. Nor had he experienced the *space* with one, and that they both felt during their first lunch together but neither told the other of it then. That came later, as did much else come later, when they showed each other all.

Riley figured this memory of their first time together, following his second dream about catching the jack crevalle, was some sort of standard of measure. For all Riley feels about Willa Sue is hope astride a businesslike attitude, when, in response to his knock on the door, he hears her say, "Riley, I want to eat that food now. Will you please bring it in? I'll step away from the door into the middle of the room. I won't try to get away, I promise."

When he puts it before her, she frowns, shakes her head. "Okay, I know what some of it is, but what's the rest of it?" Turns out she has never eaten oatmeal or sunflower seeds, or brown sugar. And she has never heard of ghee: clarified butter. She stares dumbly at him as he explains the nutritional aspects of the meal, including the loss of nutritional value because it sat uncovered in the foyer for a day and night. Then she scrunches her nose and eats it all without speaking.

When finished, she says, "Well, that was really weird, Riley, but not as weird as what I'm fixin' to tell you. After she was done telling it all, she says, "It's a sign. I need to go back, I need to speak my mind."

Riley shakes his head. "It will be the same thing as before. They will try to lock you up again."

"I won't let them lock me up," she snaps.

"You won't be able to control them, and you have a history of mental illness that is court-determined and the mental hospital has records of it, too. It won't matter a hill of beans to them that you really aren't mentally ill. If you go back there hollering again about Harlan messing with you, it will look just like it did the first time. Except this time, with you having taken off without any warning and almost no explanation, that won't help your case in the least. And if you tell them why you left, they will know for sure you're crazy and won't have much trouble convincing a judge of it. I might even end up getting charged with having had sex with an insane person, which is the same as rape. And that carries up to a life sentence in Alabama, and probably the same in Florida."

Willa Sue looks at Riley like he is the devil. He sees her sizing up the chances of making a run for it. "Don't even try it. I locked the outside door. You can't get out, without getting the key." Riley calmly says. The key is in his pocket.

She lunges, hands reaching for his throat. He catches her wrists. His grip is strong from working out, but it still takes tremendous effort to pull her hands together, crossing them over her breasts. She kicks his left shin. "Shit! Ouch!" He can't let go of her hands. Her eyes are closed, she tries to bite him. He dodges her teeth and cross steps his right leg behind her right leg, twists left, bringing her over his leg down onto her left side to the floor. He quickly rolls her over onto her stomach, releases her wrists and puts his left forearm on the back of her neck and reaches down and pulls her right foot up to her butt and locks it there with his right leg, even as he pins her left leg with his left leg. He did this maneuver many times in high school wrestling, as part of wearing down an opponent. Now maybe he can wait her out without either of them being hurt.

Willa Sue keeps turning her head left, trying to get to Riley's left arm to bite it, even as she contorts her body every which-a-way to escape his lock-hold. It's all he can do to maintain his advantage, without getting bitten. Reluctantly, he increases pressure on the back of her neck, pressing her face hard against the rug, taking away her ability to move her head. Now all she can do is squirm

her torso and legs, huff and puff and cuss better than most men, Riley observes. Then she goes still, and quiet. Then she bursts into tears and cries and cries and cries.

Riley doesn't realize Willa Sue is reliving being pinned down by Harlan in the woods and fucked from behind like dogs do it, with Harlan's big Buck knife pointed at the side of her face. With Harlan she never made noise, because he had promised to cut off her ears, nose and tits, before he killed her and chopped her up into little pieces for the bobcats, coyotes and vultures to eat. "Might even make a fire and cook some of you and eat that myself!" Harlan had sneered. When she had threatened to tell their parents, he had laughed, said, "You stupid little shit, they ain't never gonna believe you. They already believe you're half-crazy. Do you want them to believe you're *all* crazy? I'm their favorite. They'll have you sent away!"

What had caused Willa Sue to finally make a stand against Harlan was a movie she saw on TV in which Barbara Streisand played a prostitute. She became one because her father had sexually abused her, but she has forgotten about that. Then one day this macho trick tried to play rough with her and she killed the dude in self-defense, then was charged with murder. To save her from being tried for murder, her parents ask the judge to put her into a mental place because she is not the good loving girl they raised her to be, and, therefore, has to be crazy. Her court-appointed lawyer figures it all out and convinces the judge of what the father did to his client and that she is neither crazy nor a murderess. The father gets what is coming to him legally, as does the mother get what is coming to her spiritually. She had known what the father was doing with his daughter but did nothing about it.

Imagine Willa Sue's disappointment to have her parents react to her accusations against Harlan precisely as he had promised they would react. Imagine her disappointment to see them more concerned for their family image in the community, than concerned about her welfare. Imagine her disappointment to be herself tried, convicted and put away like a rapist ought to be tried, convicted and put away. Imagine her now reliving all of that underneath Riley—impossible! Only Willa Sue can imagine it, as only Riley can imagine losing Mary Lou.

Willa Sue's crying causes Riley to also burst into tears on top of her. Tears for having Mary Lou ripped away. Tears for Willa Sue trying to escape and rip Mary Lou away from him again. Tears that turn to steel resolve: he can't let that happen again. This time he will not let her leave. This time she will not be killed. This time she will return to him. This time she will be glad he took a stand against her. But will he also be glad?

Getting Real

Willa Sue has never seen a man cry, except on television shows or in a movie. Sometimes she took in movies in Tallahassee, when she went up there to the library to get books to read. However, most movies she watched were rented at the video store in Apalachicola. Harlan or Jake sometimes got videos when they went to St. Joe to get supplies for their hunting and fishing business. They took folks into The Dead Lakes north of St. Joe and Apalachicola, to fish and shoot ducks, and onto the paper company lands for white tail deer and wild pig. Sometimes they ran into a fox, coyote, bobcat, panther or bear. Panthers and bears brought big tips, but pigs were what most hunters wanted. They hunted all game but ducks with dogs descended from blue tick hounds crossed with pit bulls. Good noses, bad

jaws.

They also ran into plenty of big diamondback rattlers, evidenced by many stuffed ones that hung out about their home place: mouths wide open, fangs bared, eyes all mean looking, coiled to strike faster than a speeding bullet. A diamondback actually would strike a bullet fired at it, which had the effect of removing the diamondback's head from its body. Which is why Jake and Harlan never hunted diamondbacks with a gun. They used a stick with a noose, or just a forked stick, to get the whole snake. If a client didn't want the snake, they would eat it and save the heads to tack onto a board. Snakes got more of their dogs than did any other game. Snakes, therefore, always topped the most-wanted list. All other game was just for money.

Things didn't get particularly weird around the home place after Harlan went down to see what was keeping Willa Sue and found the keys and note under the floor mat on the driver's side. Everybody knows she is probably still crazy, everybody but Harlan. They don't figure she did anything good for herself by just up and running off mysteriously like that. But they also don't figure it will do them any good to send up an alarm. If she is found and brought back, they might have to go back to court and have her put away again. So maybe it's best to let sleeping dogs lie.

Actually, Harlan *knows* it's for the best. He just doesn't know yet how much for the best. Under one scenario, he will not know that until over a year later, when Willa Sue shows up suddenly and tells all and has the documents to prove it. They will then know for sure she is crazy, and they will set out to prove it, so they can get their hands all that money by becoming Willa Sue's legal guardians. As will quite a few lawyers try to become involved, under that scenario, to get their hands on some of the loot.

Being a lawyer and all, Riley doesn't have to be a fortuneteller to know what Harlan, Jake and their parents and their lawyers will do when they find out about Willa Sue's money. A lot of money does strange things to people, and a huge amount does really strange things. Just look at what happened to Mary Lou. That is a big reason why Riley made arrangements for the loot to go offshore, beyond the reach of hands who do not really love Willa Sue until she is suddenly an attractive lottery carrying really heavy odds against the house.

All that Riley has collected since Mary Lou's death, and all that comes in after he met Willa Sue, will be offshore and safe, if a feeding frenzy really begins for what remains unpaid in the lotto annuity. Maybe the sharks really will get some or all of what is left, maybe not. They really will walk the razor's edge by claiming Willa Sue is crazy and needs guardianship protection of her wealth: crazy people cannot usually enter legal contracts. So maybe Willa Sue really is only half-crazy: sane enough to enter into the contract with Riley, but not sane enough to be able really to manage her own affairs. Or maybe it's really not necessary that there is a contract. Maybe it's enough that Riley promised the money to her and it really isn't just for him to not have to pay it after she did what he asked of her. Instead of a contract, it really is a trust.

Under that same scenario, Riley and several well-paid psychiatrists really will testify that Willa Sue is saner than most people and that she really was sexually abused by her brother Harlan and was once put away for it by her parents to really hush it up. Willa Sue's well-paid lawyers really will argue that her family violated her civil rights and committed really grievous torts and crimes against her, and really do not have clean hands but actually have really dirty hands and are entitled to receive really nothing and, instead, owe her huge damages and really ought to be put in prison. This legal tactic will drive Willa Sue's family and their lawyers really insane. It may well also drive Willa Sue really

insane, proving her family's claim that she really was crazy all along.

Under this scenario, there is yet another candidate for madness. The IRS is already really upset that Riley inherited the lottery proceeds free of the estate tax, as the surviving spouse. The IRS soon will be really displeased about the money going offshore, where the earnings on it cannot be monitored. On learning from SouthTrust Bank that the funds are going to a Tortola numbered account, the taxman will come and speak with Riley about how much income he really is earning on those offshore funds. The taxman will say Riley really has to pay tax on those mysterious earnings. The taxman will say Riley must pay the tax out of the lotto proceeds, before those funds really leave the country. The taxman will say Riley must give the IRS really good collateral in the U.S., to insure that he really pays not only the tax on the off-shore earnings but also the tax on the lotto annuity itself. If Riley doesn't agree to this, the taxman will ask a federal judge for real protection. The federal judge will order that SouthTrust Bank and the State of Alabama Lottery Fund deduct a really big sum determined by the court, for taxes due on the lottery annuity and on the off-shore earnings, and pay that sum directly to the Internal Revenue Service.

Now if the taxman discovers that Willa Sue really is the proud owner of the lotto annuity, he will argue that she really received it as payment for contract services rendered and the present value of the entire annuity is now taxable as income to her. Instead of paying the tax on what comes in each year, the taxman will argue that Willa Sue really must pay all of the tax up front. But she really does not have the funds to do so. A real compromise will be reached, under which she agrees to pay ten one-year tax installments, in advance. That is, each April 15, she pays the tax due for the following year. However, there really is no reason for the taxman to make this discovery any time soon. The Tortola bank really will not give the taxman the names on the numbered account. For all the taxman or any other person really knows, it is Riley Strange's account alone.

However, under another really likely scenario, no one will learn that Willa Sue is the owner of the lotto annuity, because Riley and Willa Sue will just up and take themselves on a tour around the planet for the rest of their natural lives. Costa Rica and Argentina really appeal to Riley. Those countries really love immigrants with dinero, especially immigrants with really mucho dinero. Yes, Riley really needs to get his separate assets offshore, too. And really soon. Four to five million dollars between them really ought to make for a wonderful rest of their lives, even if they really lose the bulk of the lotto to Willa Sue's family and their lawyers and the IRS. Willa Sue also really needs to get a passport before anyone gets wise to her. Everything has to be ready for their great escape long before it's really launched, so as not to draw anticipatory counter moves.

Willa Sue hardly can take in what Riley learned about the law over many years. But she can take in the really strong likelihood that her family, their lawyers and the IRS will do everything possible to fuck her out of the money and put her away so they can have it all to themselves. Being fucked out of millions of dollars is one thing; being locked up in a mental place again really is something else entirely, especially when there really is nothing to be locked up about. But being locked up is what Willa Sue now knows she really faces, if she goes home and blabs about where she has been and what she is really getting out of it. She really can't go home and really has no money to go anywhere else. And Riley really doesn't seem inclined to let her out of this room. Too fucking real!

"What's for dinner, Riley?"

"I'm really glad you asked, my dear, but it's a surprise. Every meal will be a surprise. Don't really know tonight's menu yet, but may I join you for dinner? And do you want a movie to watch

today? And can I watch it with you? And how about some new books to read? I see your bookmark way back in *The Stand*. And what about shampoo, combs, brushes, toothbrush, toothpaste, body lotion and so forth? And some more clothes? You can play pretend that you are already gone from here and are in some fancy health spa in Tahiti, or wherever."

"Fuck you, Riley."

"Well, maybe we can try that on too."

"I didn't mean it that way, asshole."

"Well, how did you mean it, Willa Sue?"

"This way." She lunges for this throat again, and this time she gets there before he can grab her hands.

"Kill me and you don't get the money, honey," he croaks.

"Say what?" she loosens her grip only slightly.

"The contract requires that you stay with me for one year, or you lose all claim to the money. If you kill me, even for good cause, you don't stay with me one year. You get nothing but Apalachicola. Really bad swap, Tiger. Now please let go of my neck, before I hurt you. I'm trained in karate, and can kill with my bare hands, even my fingers."

Riley really isn't kidding. His parents had put him into the Oyama dojo in Homewood when he was just seven years old. He was breaking blocks, boards and other people's bones by the time he was thirteen. By sixteen, he had his first dan (black belt). His teacher was seventh degree black belt, only because that is as high as belts go in Kiokushin Karate.

Shihan Oyama once said he was a white belt until he was twenty-one. He could by then beat up any other student in the dojo, including his older brother. But their adopted father and teacher, Mas Oyama, would not promote Shihan because all he really wanted to do was fight. Only when Shihan mastered that aspect of himself was he given colored belts. Yet with each new belt he was really tested and provoked harder than all the other students, to make sure he would not revert to his old ways.

One day when Riley and his junior students comrades were bragging about when they would receive their own black belts and start kicking serious ass, Shihan laughed, said, "To me, you always be white belts." When Riley did finally receive his first dan, Shihan grinned and said for all the class to hear, "Karate really begins at first dan. All before just warmup." By twenty-seven, Riley was third degree dan. It took him ten more years to go to fourth degree. Then he quit trying to advance and concentrated on keeping what he had gained

Willa Sue eyes Riley warily, but does not release her grip on his neck. "Lawyers can't be trusted. Surely he isn't trained to kill with his fingers," she thinks, and broadcasts with her eyes.

"Ooops!" Her breath wooshes out of her lungs, as a steel finger presses up under her sternum, threatening to break the skin and puncture her heart. She lets go of Riley's neck.

He withdraws the weapon, smiles wanly. Really bad move. She hauls off and lands a roundhouse right squarely on his left cheekbone, knocking him flat onto his back. However, her knees-first leap onto him is stopped cold by the extended ball of his left foot sliding between her knees into her belly, doing no real damage but knocking the wind out of her again and breaking her will to continue. Riley rolls her away and onto her side into the fetal position, then launches himself off the back of his shoulders onto his feet without using his hands, the way Willa Sue has seen it done in karate movies. He dances back to a safe distance.

"Shit, Riley!" she groans, holding her belly.

"I told you, dummy, what I could do. Are you okay?"

"No thanks to you, fuckhead."

"There you go again bringing up that subject. Makes me wonder if you are lusting after me."

"No woman could ever lust after such an asshole."

Riley's gaze goes somber. "One did." He turns away, but not before she sees that he is about to cry again.

Now Willa Sue really wishes she didn't say it, but she is too upset to apologize. Too upset, not because of what he is doing to her but because she knows he had something with Mary Lou she may never have unless she becomes his Mary Lou. Only now does it truly dawn on Willa Sue just how perfectly trapped she really is. Then something really snaps, and she bursts into peels of laughter that double her over harder than did Riley's assaults to her mid-section. Then tears come to her eyes. Never before has she laughed in this way, and never before has she felt sexually aroused for a man in the flesh.

Legs sprawled apart, she looks up with big round eyes, says, "Riley, I think you're right. I think I really do want to fuck with you."

"I really don't think I can take any more of your fucking with me today, my dear. I'm really beat up for it."

Her head shakes. "I mean sex, dummy. I'm *really* lusting for you. I ain't never lusted for no man before, leastwise, not a man I could tech." Her eyes now look afraid, yet eager. Her trembling mouth says she speaks the truth. Her hands at her side say she really doesn't know what to do next.

Neither does Riley, who is really surprised by her suddenly changed demeanor and overture, and by suddenly feeling a compatible response. It's not near the level of response he had with Mary Lou, yet perhaps it's a new beginning. But she is *really* big! How to go about it?

"Let's shower together, see where it goes from there." He bathed last night and doesn't know when she last bathed. It probably wouldn't matter, if he really was on fire and wasn't facing a challenge beyond any he ever encountered in the dojo.

"Okay, but I'm...embarrassed. And it's so light in here," she says.

"Can't change the lighting. I'll get undressed first, get in the shower. You follow me there."

"Okay."

Riley quickly strips, unashamed. He has been many places where men and women do not wear clothes. He sometimes wishes clothes do not exist. Really gets down to the brass tacks in many cases. Really too close to the brass tacks now, maybe. Maybe not. He feels himself twitch, just a little. But a twitch nonetheless.

He enters the shower, turns it on and brings the water temperature to mildly hot. The glass door opens, she quickly steps in behind him. He turns, silently gasps. Her torso is three times as thick as his. Her breasts are really huge, unattractive. Her arms are bigger around than his, as are her legs. Stretch marks everywhere. Her pubic hair is barely visible: not much of it. He likes that. And he likes her mouth and the rest of her face and her black wavy hair. He also likes that he is twitching steadily and now is fully erect and she is looking at it.

She smiles slightly, reaches, touches it. "Oh!" She withdraws her hand. "I never touched one before."

He makes it jump by flexing it, even as he arcs it toward her. She smiles more broadly, reaches out to touch it again. "Oh."

She takes the end in her fingers, squeezes lightly. "Oh."

She grabs it more firmly, squeezes it, pulls herself to it, rubbing herself with it. "Oh."

Now she has it in both hands, pulling on it like milking a cow, as she rides it. "Oh, oh."

He reaches around her, barely, and hugs her to him, kisses her full on the mouth, as she continues to pull at him below. "Oh, God, oh!"

He reaches down, feels her soft fur, massages it in the cleansing waters. She is putting out fluid. He enters her with one finger, slowly. "Oh, God, oh, fuck, oh wow!"

He moves his finger around inside, as she moves herself around over his finger. "Harder, harder."

He presses his finger into her clitoris, raised like a button, hot, eager, calling. "Harder, please harder!"

He can't possible raise her up, take her in the shower. So he slides down the wet wall onto this butt, pulling her down with is finger in her, as she holds onto him just as tenaciously.

"Kneel over me if you can, Willa Sue."

She tries to kneel, but the hard tiles hurt her knees, and the weight tears at her knee joints. "Ouch! Can't do it like that."

Riley now stretches out on his back, says, "Sit on me, do it that way. Use the bottom of your

feet to hold yourself up."

Still holding him, she straddles him as he helps her guide him to her opening. She pushes at him, it catches. "Ouch." He opens her with his fingers, licks the fingers of his other hand and puts them over the end of himself. It slowly slides in all the way. "Ohhhhhhhh!" She is crying.

"Put your hands onto my chest, to help you balance," Riley says.

"Okay."

With some of her weight now on his chest, he reaches down and

begins to slowly massage her slick clitoris with his upturned thumb. She slowly moves against him, still crying, until she can cry no more because now she is coming to the end and shaking, even as he arches upward, lifting them both a few inches.

"Uhhhhhhhhhhggggg. Oh, My, God, Fuck, Fuck hard, God fuck hard!!!!!!!" Her interior muscles clamp down on him, her moving hips yank him. But the hard floor now hurts Riley's sacrum and low back and he is not yet ready to join her. She senses the situation, reaches underneath herself and tries to use her fingers as well, which is not enough. So she comes off him and kneels, working him hard up and down with one hand as she takes him into her mouth. She always wanted to do this. She pulls and sucks until he arches and grabs her behind her head, moaning, "Oh me, oh, aghhhhhh!" It goes into the back of her throat and down. She sucks all the residue out. Salty sweet.

She keeps sucking, trying to get it to happen again. But Riley is spent. "Uncle, I need to rest!"

She lets go of him with her mouth but not her hands, raises up and looks at him. "I never liked it before, Riley."

He smiles, puts his fingers into her mouth. She sucks them clean. Then he sits up, pushes her down and onto her back, spreads her legs, pushes them up and licks her clean. This time when she comes, she screams and bucks like a wild horse. Then she bursts into tears again.

Her scent is different from Mary Lou. His orgasm was good, like with women he had been with before Mary Lou. But not close to what he experienced with Mary Lou. No big twitches, no spasm, no coming to orgasm in delicious stages, no feeling like he died and went to heaven when he came. Yet Willa Sue's response seemed close to Mary Lou's first time. What does it all mean? He doesn't know. But they have become intimate. Maybe that will make it go easier.

We Plan, God Laughs!

Early in their relationship, Mary Lou and Riley both dreamt of being advised they would be receiving instruction in "paradise mating" and perhaps they might wish to read up on Adam and Eve in Genesis. Since neither Mary Lou nor Riley were inclined toward religion, these dreams met with resistance until a second set of dreams came a few days later. These dreams were individualized.

In Mary Lou's, she was in a jungle surrounded by wild animals of all kinds. "You are Eve," she heard. Riley dreamt he was swimming with dolphins off Port St. Joe State Park's beach, when he heard, "You are Adam." The next Saturday morning they purchased a Bible at the Christian bookstore just off U.S. 31 in Homewood, then drove over to the nearby botanical gardens just above Mt. Brook and went into the rose garden there and read up on Adam and Eve.

A fundamental concept in Mary Lou and Riley's evolving training was that people had repeatedly forgotten the cosmic joke that played out when Eve decided God was not serious about her dying if she ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge. To the contrary, Eve believed God really did want her to eat the fruit but had told her not to eat it to get her to eat it. As if she was a small rebellious child who would never do what God directly asked of her! Thus did Eve invent psychology.

Another fundamental concept Mary Lou and Riley learned was that Adam mistakenly believed God intended him to be with Eve forever. This belief was reinforced when Adam noticed that, after Eve ate the forbidden fruit, the wonderful space between them was gone and he felt like shit. He didn't like feeling like shit and didn't believe God wanted him to feel like shit. So he decided that the cure was to eat the fruit, to please God and to regain Eve and the wonderful space. However, after eating the fruit Adam felt like shit-squared, just like Eve felt when she told him the fruit was delicious. Thus did Adam learn about gullibility and lying.

Another fundamental concept they learned through Adam and Eve's example was that Paradise is a privilege, not a right. After they fell, Adam and Eve's lives became a yo-yo, as they struggled mightily to recover the space and divine passion with each other, and when that failed to get the job done, with others in adultery. Each time yet another vain attempt to regain the space and divine passion failed, they experienced the opposite. In a desperate effort to save himself from feeling like shit, Adam created religion that blamed conniving Eve for all that was bad and made Adam innocent and good. Thus began the war of the sexes, which ravaged mankind.

This war had ravaged both Riley and Mary Lou until they met. The war then slowly began to subside, even as they experienced serious yo-yoing. For each time they came into the wonderful space, then into Divine Passion, they subsequently went the opposite way when Mary Lou was suddenly compelled to get away from Riley. She stayed away until the urge to flee love was replaced by the urge to be with love. Then she would call Riley and ask for a date, as if nothing unusual had happened.

Each of Mary Lou's sudden leavings caused Riley to feel just like Adam felt when Eve ate the poisoned fruit—shit. Yet there was nothing Riley could do to rejoin Mary Lou, as Adam had rejoined Eve. Riley simply had to wait Mary Lou out, as his fury and madness mounted. By the time Mary Lou called seeking reunion, Riley was royally pissed off and delusional. Now driven by love and passion, Mary Lou patiently allowed Riley's venting and madness to exhaust itself, even as they slammed back together in such a way that it seemed nothing would ever pry them apart again. Yet after a few days of bliss, something weird inevitably happened to drive Mary Lou away and to cause Riley to feel like shit again.

Riley's law practice and karate, and Mary Lou's veterinary practice and love of nature, provided the outside stability they both needed to ride out these loop hurricanes. It took two years for the yo-yoing to stop and for them to be able to live together day and night without Mary Lou up and taking off. That's when they put their separate homes on the market and bought the land to build on it the house and gym.

The new property was the worldly symbol for Riley and Mary Lou's survival of the baptismal

purification, heralded when God placed two Cherubim wielding swords of fire around the tree of life to protect its ways. Riley and Mary Lou were touched by those fire swords hundreds of times before they were allowed to remain in Eden. The space and divine passion were their incentives to stay together, no matter how hot the flames in love's forge. They *earned* their priceless pearl in this healing process Riley commemorated in a poem, "Paradise Regained."

*All fig leaves burn
All ugly seen
All pain loved
All truth beauty
All time now
All security God
All people one*

Then along came temptation and Riley and Mary Lou learned, as had Adam and Eve, that Paradise is provisional, not cast in stone. Even so, Riley did not take the Adam fall with Mary Lou. Rather, he argued against the fall. He held to what he believed was true. He did not let the lottery winnings become his god. He did not trade mammon for the priceless pearl. That is why he was sent back. That is why he is able to take on Willa Sue. That, and the fact that he does not love her more than he loves himself, and thus cannot be slam-dunked by her yo-yoing, as happened when he was with Mary Lou. As happened to Adam when Eve fell.

What triggers Willa Sue's next trip south, after they shower and dress, is her asking Riley if she can now live in the house. "No, sorry. You stay here for the duration of the contract, or until you weigh one-half of what you now weigh."

"Well what if I just want out of the contract? What if I just say to forget the whole thing like it was just a dream?"

"Can't do that, Willa Sue. I made a promise and I'm not going back on it."

"What promise?"

"To Mary Lou. To help you get well."

"Get well? You some sort of *doctor*?!!!!" Angry indignation is behind those words.

It's as if they had not just made love. *Deja vue*. Riley sees Mary Lou headed south, again. He sees her leaving the house for Montgomery, again. He hears the phone ring on his credenza, again. He hears the Alabama High Patrolman's voice, again. "Never said I was a doctor, Willa Sue. But what you told me about Harlan and being locked up, and all that weight you carry, tells me you're sick."

Although his martial arts training instilled in Riley an automatic selfdefense responses to being attacked, his life conditioning instilled automatic protection of women, which had left him wide open to Willa Sue's first two assaults. However, this time he is ready and sidesteps left when she lunges for his throat, as he uses a circular motion with his right hand to deflect and guide her right arm to the left even as he catches that arm behind the elbow with his left hand. With that hold he takes her quickly to the ground, experiencing enough pain in her left right elbow to know he can break it with just a little

more pressure. His mastery over her now total, Riley waits in silence.

"Oh, shit, that hurts! Please let go!" she yowls.

"What happens if I let go?"

"Nothing happens. I'll be good," she promises. "Ow! Please!"

Riley remembers how Mary Lou always promised never to run away from him again whenever they reconciled, fully meaning it in the moment she said it. Then something was said between them, or someone called about something, or she heard something on the radio or read something in a book, and she was adios with zero remorse. Sometimes it came in the middle of a candlelight dinner, or during an intimate bath together, or just on waking in the morning to talk about their dreams, or while talking on their cell phones on the way to work. Wham! Riley never saw it coming. It was as if there was two of her. There really was two of her: one of her loved him completely, the other wanted him dead.

Willa Sue's two faces are now fully visible, although the inducing factors are quite different. Riley never physically captured Mary Lou, although he often wanted to do just that. Had he done so, she probably never would have completely thrown in the towel, given herself to him totally. Yet Riley does not believe Willa Sue is like Mary Lou in that respect. He doesn't believe Willa Sue will come back if he lets her out of the gym and she runs off. For she knows his non-negotiable requirement: lose one-half her weight, or stay locked up one year. She knows it is not just for Riley's benefit that he has that requirement, but is for her benefit as well. She also knows Riley knows she knows she will never lose the weight if she leaves the gym.

When Riley actually says this, Willa Sue sighs, weeps. Riley lets up on the pressure on her elbow but maintains his hold. Finally, she says, "You're right, Riley. But I hate being locked up in here."

"I know that and I don't like doing it. I will do what I can to make it bearable," he promises. "I'll get you some new books to read. A movie for tonight. Whatever else you need in here, to make it bearable. We can spend as much time together as you wish. I'll even sleep in here, as long as I get to do what needs doing to keep us alive and so forth. And as long as I get to spend enough time on the book I'm now ready to start writing. I can do that in here, too. Just bring in the laptop and plug it up."

"What you going to write 'bout? You en me?"

Riley shakes his head. "I'll let you read it as it goes along. Maybe you can help me with it. Never wrote a book before. I would be good to have a sounding board to tell me how it sounds."

"Okay, that might be a fun thing. I always wondered how writers wrote them books they write. And why they write them." Her eyes are bright, she is smiling.

"I think they write them because they have to write them. Well, the good writers I think are like that. Not sure about John Grisham. Sometimes I think he writes just to make a lot of money, instead of making it practicing law. Maybe he didn't make much money as a lawyer."

"Riley, are you jealous of Mr. Grisham?"

"Hardly. I'm a *real* lawyer. I don't need to prove that to anyone, least of to myself. To tell the truth, I think Grisham has done a good job educating people about lawyers, judges, courtrooms and so forth. He makes up some good stories. But the book I want to write is about real stories that might not be so entertaining as what Grisham writes about but are what it's really like. I aim to educate, not entertain, but I hope to write so that it also is entertaining. Otherwise, who'd want to read it? Not me."

It seems good that they each have a project: Riley's book, Willa Sue's weight loss. Yet Riley knows it will be up and down for a long time, no matter how hard he tries. For, as was also the case with Mary Lou, the part of Willa Sue that hates him, also hates love and will do everything possible to kill that love. Riley knows this is what happened to Eve after she and Adam fell and he blamed her for it, rather than taking the blame for joining her. A part of Eve turned bad, mean, evil, over the injustice. She had no clue what would happen if she ate of the fruit; she actually believed it was what God wanted her to do.

Riley came to understand that eating the fruit really was what God wanted Eve to do. Allwise, God knew neither Adam nor Eve would ever truly appreciate Paradise until they had fully experienced its opposite. Only then would they be ready to reverse their fall away from God and begin their fall back into God. During the fall back into God, Riley came to view life very differently. He came to believe that there were only two things that mattered: God and his marriage to Mary Lou. Riley also believed Mary Lou shared his point of view, but he discovered when she won the lottery that Adam's role in the return to God is to put God first, no matter what Eve does.

Now while it has occurred to Riley that maybe he might some day write about this way of looking at life and the Creation, his inspiration now is to write about something more down to earth and familiar. Thus it is that, after returning to the house and fetching his laptop back to the gym, he begins his first book: KILL ***ALL*** THE LAWYERS?

The second question frames the Author's Preface to the book. It is a question Riley figures any half-ass lawyer would just naturally ask, if money were to be made at it.

Since the Bible says Adam and Eve were the first two humans, after they had Cain and Abel and after Cain killed Abel, who did Cain then breed with to propagate the human race? Eve? His sister? Adam? A monkey?

Even in the beginning, human beings, just like their monkey cousins, screwed their parents, siblings and offspring. The resulting chaos caused God to reluctantly create rules for living and lawyers to guard those rules, to save humanity from screwing itself to death. The truth, whole truth and nothing but the truth is that lawyers were God's first messiah. And you say, "Kill all the lawyers!" Tsh, tsh.

Real Lawyers

After taking a break from the writing and leaving it for Willa Sue to read, Riley brings into

the gym a mason jar with water in it stuffed full of fresh-picked flowers from the garden, and from the house carries in two double mattresses, pillows and linens, and a couple of recliners.

"I like the way the book starts, Riley. Helps me understand what makes Harlan like he is. But that lawyer my family used to get me into the mental place, he didn't do me no good. He wasn't no messiah. Heard he was religious, too. Some day I want to send him what you wrote about Cain fucking folks you ain't s'posed to fuck."

"Suit yourself, lady. Maybe we put your story in the book. What do you say?"

"I say put it in. If you going to write about lawyers being Jesus, somebody's got to write about them being the devil. Else the book won't be true."

Riley nods, says he is ready to start writing again.

Willa Sue starts to check out the exercise equipment. He already suggested that she try out the exercycles and and stairmasters to begin with, saving for later the Nautilus. He also shows her how to turn the two machines on and make settings. She begins with the exercycle, a towel wrapped around her neck. Soon she is breathing hard, grunting. She doesn't like breathing hard and grunting. It doesn't feel good. And it reminds her of Harlan behind her, breathing hard and grunting like a pig. When she starts sweating, it reminds her even more of Harlan.

Riley resumes writing a bible for clients of lawyers.

It is said that we lawyers take care of our own and that takes precedence over anything else. I remember a case I filed against a doctor when I was new in the practice. A stupid case. Stupid because it had no merit. Stupid because I filed it mainly to force the doctor to reveal information that I believed he had which would assist me in another case I had filed. When finally I realized the doctor had nothing of value, I admitted to the judge that the case had no merit and he dismissed it with prejudice to my client. Meaning, we lost that case.

In that moment, the doctor had a good malicious litigation case against both my client and me, which he wanted his defense lawyer to file. However, the lawyer talked his client out of it, saying it would be too taxing on him, and I was just a young eager lawyer trying to prove my manhood and to be compassionate with me. Maybe the lawyer saw his young self in me. Maybe he saw the doctor in me, for the doctor was a fighter by nature.

In any event, the lawyer shared this with me in private and suggested that I might wish to be more judicious in the future about bringing a lawsuit. I thanked him and left his office glad not to be the target of a lawsuit I would have surely lost. And my estate client would have had a malpractice case against me, for getting her sued as well. I would have had to report both lawsuits to the Alabama State Bar, because the issues were unethical behavior on my part. In the end, I would have been disciplined, either by private or public censure, suspension from the practice of law, or disbarment.

So did that defense lawyer sell out his client to help me? Perhaps. But then, he knew his client had medical problems, which I did not know. A few months later, I learned that the doctor had died of a heart attack. Interestingly, the issue in the main case I had filed was whether a private non-instrument-rated pilot had died of a heart attack attempting an instrument approach in bad weather, or

whether he had simply flown the plane into the ground because he didn't know how to make an instrument landing.

The autopsy of the pilot had revealed advanced coronary artery disease and the coroner had therefore assumed and had stated in the death certificate that the pilot had suffered coronary failure and that is what had caused the plane to crash and kill the pilot and two passengers. In Alabama, a certified death certificate is prima facie (presumed) evidence of what really happened. Prima facie evidence can be rebutted by other evidence, but if it is not rebutted it is deciding in a case at law.

I represented the widow of one of the passengers. If the crash was due to pilot heart failure, then I couldn't sue the pilot's estate for pilot error. However, the doctor I sued had examined the pilot and had administered a resting EKG just six months before the crash, as part of a FAA-required pilot certification examination. The doctor had given the pilot a clean bill of health. Ergo, the doctor was negligent during the examination, which negligence allowed the pilot to continue to fly and to kill my client's husband.

The fact of the matter was, any cardiologist I might have chosen to query would have told me that a resting EKG seldom reveals a heart condition, unless the condition is gross and cardiac failure is imminent. An exercise EKG is more likely to reveal a heart condition, but is not used by most doctors because they do not like the prospect of a client going into cardiac arrest in their examining room as the result of over-exertion. This is precisely what I was told by a cardiologist after the case was dismissed against the doctor and I was now going only against the pilot's estate.

The coroner's report also said that the pilot's heart was found ripped out of the pilot's chest and was lying in shreds on the ground beside the wreckage. My expert said the massive tearing the heart experienced when it separated from the body caused such extensive tissue damage that there was no possible way to diagnose coronary failure. He also said the body creates secondary blood vessels to bypass clogged ones. The pilot's history of being an exercise nut and having no prior history of cardiac failure suggested that he had plenty of blood circulation to his heart, despite also having advanced coronary artery disease.

This doctor's opinion became my rebuttal evidence that the pilot did not suffer heart failure. Rather, he was simply an arrogant fool who attempted an instrument landing in bad weather without declaring an emergency and advising the air traffic controller that he wasn't instrument rated and needed to be talked down onto the runway. The air traffic controller at the airfield in question could have done this, because he saw the plane on the radar and as long as the pilot did as the controller instructed, it probably would have turned out okay. By now I had found reported incidents of non-pilot passengers who took over the controls after a pilot became incapacitated, and who were talked safely down by air traffic controllers.

When I finally got my act together and laid all this out for the lawyer defending the pilot's estate, he offered to settle the case for \$100,000. He represented an insurance company, of course, not the estate itself. The estate was only liable for any amount over and above the policy limits. So I offered to settle the case for the policy limits. If the lawyer turned that offer down and I got a jury to award more than the policy limits, then the defense lawyer himself could have been sued for the excess over the policy limits by the pilot's estate. The policy limits turned out to be \$300,000.

I recommended settlement to the widow-executrix, in lieu of a protracted trial, which would painfully raise her beloved lost husband from the dead many times before it was all said and done.

Also, I said, a jury might not feel sympathy for a young scuba diving instructor traveling to the Florida Keys with a young woman who was the pilot's girlfriend on the side—adultery. Maybe a jury also might wonder why the young man didn't check out the pilot's flight certification before even getting in the airplane. Maybe a jury might be really conservative and figure this young man's life was only worth \$100,000. And maybe a member of the jury might be even more conservative and figure it was God's will anyway, and Jesus said not to sue people about anything. If that juror hung the jury, a mistrial would be declared and the case would have to be tried over again.

I then said I was only just getting started. For no matter what the jury might decide, if a verdict comes back for more damages than the trial judge feels is proper, he can reduce the verdict and dare both sides to appeal. And if after the trial judge is done with the case, if the verdict is greater than the defense lawyer and his insurance company think is right, there can be a lengthy appeal, and who knows where that might go? The Alabama Supreme Court can affirm the trial verdict and impose a penalty on the defendant for making a losing appeal. Or the Court can find the case has merit but the damage award was too high and half that amount is more correct. Or the Court might find the trial judge made erroneous prejudicial rulings against the defendant and the case needs to be retried.

Lastly, I asked the widow if any amount of money would restore what she had lost? "No," she said. "There was \$200,000 in life insurance. We had some investments. I would give it all and the \$300,000 to have him back. Let's take what they have offered. After your fee (one-third), that gives me enough to take care of myself and our two children. We need to put this behind us and try to get on with life."

Now except when a lawyer is in deep trouble with the law, as I was briefly in the case reported above, he is not taken care of by the lawyer brotherhood. In fact, the lawyer brotherhood does all it can to make him miserable. Just as I did all I could to make the doctor and his lawyer and the insurance company and its lawyer miserable. And when the County Bar Association picnic rolls around next spring and all the lawyers go to it and get soused and start rolling dice and telling stories on each other, an outsider might wonder what in the hell is going on?!!!!

What is going on is that we are members of a club that sees the worst side of humanity, and the best side of it. That lawyer who saved his client from suing me, and saved me from doing something like that again, was a saint in that season. Maybe another day he was a sinner like me. In fact, he was that in another day.

It turned out he had not filed an income tax return in over a decade, and when the tax man came calling, there arose a hue and cry in certain circles to have him disbarred. But it turned out that I was not the only stupid young lawyer or ailing client this lawyer had saved from himself. And when it was all said and done, he entered a nolo contendere plea in the United States District Court, meaning he did not admit or deny the charges of income tax evasion. He also agreed to pay a fine and most of the back taxes over a period of time, and got to keep his law license. And never once during this ordeal did he return to the bottle.

You see, for many years he had been a drunk who practiced law until one day another lawyer took him aside in private and said he either had to shape up or the State Bar would take his license from him. Practicing law was all he had other than the bottle, and he gave up the bottle for the law, who is indeed a jealous mistress. It never came out why he didn't file tax returns, but I figured it was because he felt guilty about something bad he once did and never told anyone, which made him into a drunk. Stopping drinking didn't make him feel less guilty, so he did something else wrong so he could

get caught and repent both wrongs at the same time.

Now there is another kind of lawyer than the ones described above, a lawyer who needs to be killed. I once had a client who had been sexually abused by her brother and her religious family didn't believe her because they couldn't believe anything a woman said bad about a man because of what Eve had done in the Bible, and because if their daughter was right, then that would make them look like bad parents for raising another Cain, and that would make them look bad in their church, and, well, they got themselves a religious lawyer who believed women couldn't be trusted either and he helped them get their daughter put into a mental institution.

This lawyer did nothing illegal or unethical under the laws of Caesar, but he did plenty that was illegal and unethical under the laws of God. For if he had been really interested in finding out what had happened, he would have asked the brother to take a polygraph test and to submit to psychiatric examination himself, just to make sure the accusing sister was lying. But this lawyer didn't do that.

Since this was a sanity inquisition, the judge had to appoint a lawyer to represent the sister, since she was accused of being crazy and was a minor. The judge also was religious, as was the lawyer he appointed to represent the accused crazy sister. Being religious, they, too, presumed the girl was lying, or was crazy, or was both. But they had to give her her day in court. And to do that, they had to have her examined by a psychiatrist, who also turned out to be religious. Yes, it was a religious conspiracy. A religious conspiracy of men against women. A religious conspiracy that never once dared suggest that the accused crazy girl and her brother both be administered polygraph tests and psychiatric examinations, just to make sure the boy was telling the truth and the girl was not. Prima facie, the girl was lying, as Eve had lied to Adam. Presumed guilty. Unable to prove herself innocent, the girl was sent away for the family's own good.

Only when she became my client after winning the state lottery and having need of counsel about how to keep her family from saying she was incompetent to manage her affairs and they needed to manage the lotto proceeds did it happen: I sent her to a polygraph expert. He said she was telling the truth. Then I sent her to a psychiatrist. He said the same thing. I then offered the polygraph expert's report and the psychiatric evaluation to her family's lawyer, who had gotten her put away in the first place. I invited him to have the brother polygraphed and psychiatrically examined. The lawyer said polygraphs are not admissible into evidence and the brother didn't need to see a psychiatrist because he wasn't accused of being crazy.

That lawyer needed killing right then and there. But since I couldn't get away with doing that, I did the next best thing. I called the editor of the newspaper where the family lived. It had already covered my client winning the lottery, and now the way was paved for more. I told the editor what was happening to my client, again, and about the polygraph test and psychiatric evaluation, which the lawyer for the family had refused to have the brother take. I told the editor if he did not run the story locally, I would send it to every local newspaper around him to run. Did he want to run it? Yep.

After the story ran and became common knowledge in that county, thus in all prospective jurors in that county, I wrote to the lawyer for the family and said that if this matter was not dropped, I would help my client file a grievance with that lawyer's state bar grievance committee, for his having wrongfully put her put into a mental institution without having first tried to get to the bottom of what actually happened. And also for having refused to have the brother now submit to a polygraph and

psychiatric evaluation, to see what that might reveal.

I also said in that letter that I would file suit in the local civil court against the family and the lawyer, claiming they were in a conspiracy to terrorize and imprison my client, in violation of the United States and Florida Constitutions. I explained that such a suit would put the lawyer into a conflict of interest with the family and make it unethical for him to continue to represent the them. In fact, the lawyer would have to engage defense counsel for himself, as would the family have to engage its own defense lawyer.

I also said that I would send a copy of the lawsuit papers and polygraph report and psychiatric evaluation to the United States Attorney for the Northern District of Florida, and say that my client wanted her family and their lawyer prosecuted for criminal violations of her civil rights and for violating the RICO ACT, passed by Congress to stop organized criminal terrorist activity.

Lastly, I said that I would file a probate suit before the same judge who had ruled my client was mentally incompetent and ask that he make a new determination as to her mental capacity. I would ask that the brother and my client be given various psychiatric tests, designed to subconsciously evoke true responses, and that the psychiatrist then testify in court as to the results of those tests. I also said that if the judge did not grant my requests, then the civil damage suit in local court would be amended to name the judge as defendant, in conspiracy with the family and their lawyer to deprive my client of her civil rights.

Guess what? All of a sudden, the lawyer for the other side called and said his clients wanted to forget the whole thing.

"You would do something like that for me?" Willa Sue asks after reading what Riley has just made up about her case.

"No, not me. I'd get my law partner to do it. I couldn't handle it because of all the other stuff going on between us. Conflict of interest."

"Is he as good a lawyer as you, Riley?"

"Better. He's still a lawyer. I quit, remember."

Eat Your Vegetables,

Baby

That evening Riley grills a top sirloin and two baked potatoes, and prepares a fresh salad and vegetable stir fry with produce from the garden he and Mary Lou had started upon purchasing the land in the fall of 1995. A neighbor who raised horses and was one of Mary Lou's clients had first tilled the garden site with his tractor. Riley and Mary Lou then spread on free elephant manure they had hauled in Mary Lou's pickup from the Birmingham Zoo, and black compost they had poached from the

Mountain Brook City dump. And lime. The man came back with the tractor and tilled that in. They then planted rye grass, and when it was a few inches high the man came back and tilled the garden again. The rich dirt grew rampant with worms, whose rich castings further fertilized the soil and whose burrowings softened it even more.

By now Riley and Mary Lou had frost tolerant vegetable and herb seedlings growing in flats and little containers, which they transplanted into the early garden. They enjoyed fresh organic salad and herbs all spring, and the first warm weather crop was bountiful enough for them, the bugs, moles, rabbits, birds and white-tail deer to have more than they all could eat. Even in the following winter they harvested more carrots, parsnips, parsley, turnips, rutabagas, spinach and kale than they needed. Mary Lou carried the extra produce to her clinic and left it out front in a box for clients to take home.

In succeeding falls, they simply planted and turned in rye grass and kept spreading on baby chick scratch feed, which is already cracked and does not sprout and grow into weeds. Two coveys of quail, drawn to the summer garden for worms and bugs, and local and migrating mourning doves, black birds, cardinals, finches, sparrows, wrens and crows attacked the grain and manured and limed the winter garden with their droppings. This drove Riley and Mary Lou's two cats, Moses and Jezebel, nuts. Yet despite lot of stealth and creeping around, very few fine-feathered-friend meals fell the felines' way.

The deer drove Riley and Mary Lou's mutt insane. Part basset hound, part who knew what?, Judas couldn't keep up with a deer, which ran off to parts unknown when chased by a dog. But he did enjoy sniffing the looping circular trail of cottontail rabbits and harassing them with his low braying howl. He only caught a rabbit in his dreams and he didn't dare mess with Moses or Jezebel, who were brought onto the property first, from Mary Lou's clinic—gifts from clients. They taught the young pup proper manners by slapping him silly the very first time he acted as if a cat was something a dog just naturally ought to chase and eat.

The vegetable garden was circular, and all around the exterior and in smaller interior circles Mary Lou, mostly, had planted perennial flowers and herbs for the house and just to look at and smell and feed the bees and humming birds, which swarmed the garden. As did martens take up residence in the gourds hung from poles, to eat mosquitoes. And blue birds came to the houses they tacked against fencing, to eat other bugs.

Mary Lou had that magic with animals, and with plants. She was the nature angel, Riley the work mule. Together, they turned the open acre around the house into a veritable Eden. Guests who drove in to visit during the growing season were stunned over the verdant rainbow. But after Mary Lou's death, the pets simply disappeared and it was all Riley could do just to keep the grass and weeds cut down, and work the vegetable garden. Even most of that work he had hired out to the son of the fellow with the tractor. Now that had stopped, when Riley called the lad upon returning from Florida and said he needed to get back into shape and would be doing the yard work from now on.

Willa Sue looks at the meal, begins on the steak, and then the potato with black pepper and ghee on it. "No salt?"

"No salt. Bad for the blood pressure, weight."

"What's those green things in the salad, Riley?"

"Different kinds of lettuces, spinach, chard, arugula, cilantro, chives, garlic leaves, nasturtium."

"I had lettuce and spinach before, but it didn't look like any of this."

"Was it fresh?"

"The lettuce was. It came in a big light-green ball from the store."

"Iceberg lettuce. Don't grow that here. Not enough vitamins and minerals, and it doesn't taste all that good, either."

"Vitamins and minerals?"

"Yeah, keeps your bones, blood, tendons and muscles strong, and your immune system healthy. And helps your brain to work right, especially minerals."

"Who says so?"

"Certainly not McDonalds or Burger King, lady."

I like McDonald's and Burger King."

"So I see."

She frowns, picks at the cooked greens. "What's this?"

"Braised Russian red kale, chard and mustards. A movable vitamin and mineral feast."

"Yuck."

"Eat it."

"Don't like it."

"You didn't even try it. Besides, it likes you. Eat it. Eat the salad, too. It also likes you."

"I think I'll be sick if I eat all that green stuff. It looks like it's still alive or something. Cow food."

"That's all true. Also people food."

"I don't want it. I want real food."

"Like what?"

"Like french-fries, potato chips, Texas toast, corn, pork n' beans."

"And ice cream and Hershey bars?"

"Yeah, that too."

"Willa Sue, did you ever do drugs?"

"No."

"Not even beer, coffee or cigarettes?"

"I did beer sometimes. Coffee a lot of times. No cigarettes. Never liked them. They say on TV cigarettes are bad for you."

"So is coffee and beer," Riley says, "but sometimes I poison myself with them. Everybody's got vices. But I don't poison myself with junk food, which is what you want to eat. Just like other drugs. Makes you want more of it but doesn't do anything for you but break you down, weaken you."

"I don't want to eat that green stuff, Riley."

"It's necessary for good health, my dear. And it also will change your metabolism and help you lose weight faster than if you just eat steak and potatoes, which I see you like. The green stuff will also improve your digestion. You ever get constipated?"

"That's a mighty personal question, Riley."

"Well, do you?"

"Sometimes."

"You like being constipated?"

"No."

"These greens will cure you of being constipated."

"Really?" Actually, she is always constipated.

"Yeah, pretty damn quick, too."

She forks up a bite of the cooked greens, eats it. Then another bite.

"Try the salad. I made the dressing."

"What's in it?"

"Toasted sesame oil, fresh lemon juice, fresh garlic, spicy mustard and a dab of raw honey."

She takes a bite of salad. Chews slowly. Doesn't look particularly enthralled, but takes another bite. Not being constipated appeals to her.

"What's the crunchy red stuff on top of the salad, Riley?"

"Raw beets. For iron and helps you go to the bathroom."

"Never had raw beets. Only those that come in cans. Don't taste anything like this."

"No, beets in cans are cooked to death."

"You some kind of health nut, Riley?"

"Yep, that's me. But Mary Lou's mostly to blame for it. My folks taught me how to eat right, but like most kids I strayed to fast and junk foods. Then she comes along with all her scientific training about what animals need to eat to be healthy and soon enough I was another one of the animals she was making eat right."

"I heard about health food nuts on TV, especially on Oprah Winfrey. She's always getting fat and losing weight. Can't seem to keep it off her."

"Well, if you get it off and keep it off, you can get on her show and tell her how it happened. Wouldn't that be wild?"

"Yeah, it'd be plenty wild. Get me locked up in the mental place again."

"And me locked up in a penitentiary, probably. Maybe that's not such a good idea. Just eat your vegetables, Willa Sue, so we can watch the movie, or take another shower, maybe, or something. And keep drinking more water than you think you can hold, so all that shit breaking lose in you can be washed out of you."

Riley had rented several movies at a quantity discount while he was out earlier in the day. He now figures that will be a good way to get to bed time.

Willa looks at him closely. They haven't talked much about making love, but she wants to talk about it. She never had such an experience as yesterday. Now she knows what all the fuss about sex is about. Or she thinks she knows. Actually, the people she has heard talk about sex never had sex like what she had with Riley. Only someone lit up by God can induce that kind of sex in a woman, Riley learned when he was with Mary Lou. He is still wondering how he did it for Willa Sue, since it wasn't the same for him with her as it was with Mary Lou.

"Riley, I really liked what we did in the shower. I want to do it again when you feel like it."

He looks at her, nods. What to say beyond that, he doesn't know. But she deserves a verbal response. She takes another bite of salad, chews slowly, staring at him, waiting. He reaches over, ruffs up her hair, says, "I'm still hung up on Mary Lou, and you know that. Something in me is holding me back from being with you the way I was with her. I see it was good for you like it was for her. I'm happy about that. It was okay for me, like with women before Mary Lou, mostly. I think it will get better as you lose weight, become more agile. But how much better, I don't know. Time will be the judge on that point. In the meantime, I need to go as I feel, and you too. I'll do what I can to be available in that way, but I can't do it when I'm not in the mood. We'll just have to feel our way along."

She nods, takes a bit of the cooked greens. Despite his caution to her, she is starting to feel aroused. This amazes her. She never just felt aroused for any reason. Always she had to make herself feel aroused by rubbing herself or reading a sex scene in a book or seeing one in a movie. Now she wants Riley to rub her, make her go off again. She is embarrassed to tell him, so she eats the rest of the cooked greens, then finishes off the salad. Unknown to her, Riley is sympathetically responding to her rising passion. Now that she is done eating, he says what he is feeling.

"Let's get on one of those mattresses, lady, and see what we see." He smiles.

She smiles, licks her lips, stands and heads for her mattress.

This time they begin lying side by side, kissing, touching, slowly undressing each other. She is fully ready even before he touches her down there. He becomes fully ready in that moment and takes her from the top, obviously the easiest way for them both. It takes her breath away when he enters her, then tears come. She comes quickly, then again, gasping more the second time than the first. On the third time, he comes with her, and she screams. Again, it's good, like before Mary Lou. Again, it's terrible, not like Mary Lou. Again, Willa Sue feels as if she has just died and gone to heaven.

Boomerang Karma

Instead of watching a movie, Willa Sue and Riley pass out. This often happened after Riley and Mary Lou made love. It was as if they were put under anesthesia: they were awake, then they were asleep. Waking up was like coming out of anesthesia: groggy, slowly. No hurry to be up and about anything. Made it hard to get to work in the morning, if they made love late the night before. Made it impossible if they made love in the morning. Making love was the most obvious trigger for Mary Lou's disappearing acts during the first two years of their relationship. Two, three, four deeply intimate days together raised the demons up in her so big that she couldn't get away from Riley quick enough.

Willa Sue awakens in the darkness, sees luminous hands on the wall clock over the door into the gym. It's one in the morning. She is panicked after just dreaming of being chased down, ripped out of her hiding place and about to be devoured by a huge demon-eyed, salivating, razortoothed, voracious Tyrannosaurus Rex. This dream creature had chronically plagued her until she developed amnesia in the mental place. Then T-rex left and all memory of it as well.

As Willa Sue now remembers the old dreams, she throws off the bedspread under which they are sleeping and leaps toward the door. Her howls and fists striking the wood slowly drag Riley out of his drugged sleep.

"What's wrong?" he mumbles, but she doesn't hear him over her own commotion. He sits up, crawls to her and touches her leg with his hand. She shrieks all the louder, kicks at him, striking him squarely on top of his right thigh. "Ouch!"

She kicks again, this time it catches and nearly breaks his right forearm now holding his own thigh. Instinctively, he rolls away from her and up to standing, poised to receive and deflect her next strike. But she is still facing the door, pounding it, screaming unintelligible, anguished sounds. To Riley it sounds like a trapped wild beast. It is.

Now she turns, faces him. Her expression no longer terror but hatred. She charges head down, to butt him. Like a matador he sidesteps and pirouettes around and waits on her next move. Another charge, followed by another pirouette. Then another round. Then she stops breathless, panting, facing him like a bull gathering for yet another charge. When she comes he now has the bedspread, and when she passes it floats down over her and he wraps her up in it and takes her to the ground, squirming and cursing but safe. Now he has refuge to wait her out. Now she has solace to weep. Then cold chills come, and great shaking. Then more tears. Then quiet.

"I just went crazy," she later says lying next to him, under the blanket.

"Yep, that you did."

"Maybe they were right. Maybe I really *am* crazy."

"Part of you is. Has to be, after all you had done to you. It would be crazy if you weren't part crazy, don't you think?" Riley explains it.

"Guess so. But it scares me, being crazy."

"It would scare me, lady, if you didn't get scared."

"Huh?"

"Look, if you didn't get scared about being crazy, you *would* be crazy. Weren't there crazy people in the mental place?"

"God, yes. A bunch of them."

"What were they like?"

"Oh, one just sat against a wall all the time, except when it was time to eat. He sat rocking back and forth, hitting the back of his head against the wall."

"Ever cause any problems?"

"No, not him. But another one, well, he was in Vietnam. Said he had traumatic shock syndrome. He was always going off on people, saying he would fly out of control and hurt them, if they didn't leave him alone. I stayed away from him."

"Wait a minute. There were men in there with you?"

"At meals, activities, breaks. But we had different places where we slept, watched TV. And different bathrooms."

"Any others in there that bothered you?"

"Well, there was this woman who was always talking about Jesus and angels, and how she was saved and was going to heaven and it didn't matter what anybody said about that. Then before you could shake a stick, she was screaming that devils were coming to get her and she wanted her mommy and daddy, but when the aids came to make her quiet she screamed at them for saying they would be her parents for now. She said they were devils, and she'd run around the TV room sliding chairs behind her so they couldn't catch her. But they always caught her and sat her in something like a kid's high chair in a straight jacket. But in no time she would be done wiggled herself out of it, and they had to chase her again. Sometimes they chased her most of the night, until finally they gave her something to stop the devils from chasing her, and then she'd get quiet and sleep. Then before long it started all over again, with her being saved by Jesus and the angels were looking down on her telling her how wonderful she was, and all of a sudden it wasn't angels but demons looking down on her and there she would go off again."

"Did she ever seem scared of herself?"

"No."

"Any of the others ever seem scared of themselves?"

"No. Well, there was one who was scared of himself. A man who came in looking all red-skinned and like he was about to explode. Heard he was a drunk and was coming off it, and they had given him something to keep him from exploding. Later when I ate a meal with him he said he had rage attacks and had gotten scared that he was going to hurt someone real bad, so he put himself into the mental place. Said his doctor in there thought that maybe he ought to stay in there the rest of his life, and he seemed to think that was a good idea too."

"Were you afraid of him?"

"No, he never tried to make me afraid of him."

"Did you see him try to make anyone else afraid of him?"

"No. He kept to himself mostly. Usually he would sit in a chair against the wall, when we were all doing some activity and not say anything to anybody."

"Did he ever seem afraid in the place?"

"No."

"Were you afraid in the place?"

"Scared to death."

"Why?"

"I hated it in there and was afraid I would be in there the rest of my life. And that made me afraid that I might go crazy, and be like that man who knocked his head against the wall, or the woman who was always being saved then chased by demons."

"That fellow who beat his head against the wall, did he seem afraid of anything?"

"No, and I wasn't afraid of him either, because he was too busy hitting the wall with his head to be worrying about."

"What about the Vietnam fellow. Did he ever seem to be afraid of himself?"

"No. Never. He scared me plenty, though, just listening to him talk about what he was going to do with people who didn't treat him the way he ought to be treated. Acted as if he was a general and everybody else was privates. Ordering the aids around. They grabbed him and put him into the bubble whenever he got too bad with it, and that stopped it for a day or two. Then he was back at it, then back in the bubble, yelling until he couldn't yell no more."

"What were you yelling at tonight, fighting with?" Riley finally asks.

She gives him a sheepish look, shrugs. "A tyrannosaurus."

"Hmmm. Ever dream about a tyrannosaurus before this?"

"Yeah, before the mental place, but I had forgotten. The dream made me remember it all. That's why I went crazy."

"Does this tyrannosaurus have a name?"

"No, never told me his name. Never gave him one neither. Never even thought about him having a name. Do tyrannosauruses have names?"

"Not back in dinosaur times, I don't guess. Well, maybe they did but we don't know how they talked to each other. Maybe they were smart, even smarter than us. Like Mary Lou thought dolphins and whales were smarter than us, too smart to let us know just how smart they really are. Makes you wonder if maybe we aren't so smart as we would like to think. But I think I'm smart enough to wonder if your tyrannosaurus doesn't really have a name. And if so, I wonder what it is?"

"You ask him, then. I ain't getting no nearer to him than I already did!"

"Tell you what, Willa Sue. My karate teacher always said you can't run away from what you're afraid of. It'll always chase you until you stop running and face it down. You tried to face it down by going after me, but I'm not it so it didn't change anything. It didn't change anything when I tried to run away from Mary Lou, by drinking myself nearly to death, either. Only nearly got me so crazy that nobody could have helped me, if folks who cared for me had not taken matters into their own hands. Then I had this experience when I was in the mental place. Probably nicer, though, than the one you were in. I was conked out most of the time and when I came out of it they let me go the next day."

"Just like that? They let you go?"

"No, not just like that. My law partner and I both threatened to sue them, if they didn't let me go. Doctors hate being sued, so they let me go. Besides I wasn't acting crazy any more, so maybe they felt that was another reason to let me go."

Willa Sue looks askance.

Riley shrugs, smiles impishly. "While I was in there conked out, I went to heaven and was with Mary Lou. She apologized for dying the way she did, said it was crazy of her. Then she told me she had shown me what love is, the deepest kind of love, deeper even than a parent has with a child, or a brother has with a sister, or friends have. She said she had given me a great gift, and she had gotten the same gift from me. But she had thrown the gift away, but I hadn't thrown it away. So she had to leave earth but I had to stay behind, to learn about other kinds of love. I didn't want to come back, but I couldn't stay there. So we planned it for me to come back just as they were about to use electroshock therapy on me. We wanted to make it look like a miracle had happened. Actually, wasn't anything of the sort. Was just how things work over there, in heaven. Not like things work over here, not usually anyway."

Riley pauses, not sure where to go, how to go there. This is his inner sanctum. It's also a

woman's inner sanctum, and she isn't here saying it's okay to tell what has already been said. But if she *was* here, he wouldn't be saying it in the first place. He would still be with her. And he's not with her. He is with a whopper of a woman who looks like the one who isn't here but is married to a T-Rex. A woman he is learning to love, but a different kind of love than with the woman who isn't here.

"What other kinds of love?" Willa Sue asks, forcing him to continue.

"Selfless love, maybe. Helping you but not knowing what I get back for doing it. Maybe you take Mary Lou's place. Maybe I even like you more than I like her. Maybe you end up hating me, or I end up wishing I never met you. Or I end up in jail. Or ostracized. But I don't let that stop me from what I'm doing. I promised Mary Lou that I would come back and take what hands life deals to me and do my best to love the people I play those hands with, no matter who they are, no matter how they behave. That was what she said would be the greatest gift I could ever give to myself."

Willa Sue can't bring herself to say anything. It's too deep to say anything. And too sacred.

"I'm often afraid," Riley continues. "Afraid I can't do what I promised to do: love people no matter what. Maybe I'm too selfish, too mean. Maybe I want people to love me like Mary Lou loved me. Then I can love them as much as they love me. Afraid. Don't you see, Will Sue? I'm afraid too? But if I wasn't afraid, then I'd be crazy. Just like you'd be crazy if you weren't afraid of that T-Rex in you."

"In me?"

"Yep, in you. You dreamed of it. So it has to be in you, cause your dreams are you, just another part of you than this part out here."

"That's what I read in one of Stephen King's books, I think. Or maybe it was some other book. Dreams are as real as this."

"No, Willa Sue, dreams are more real because they tell us about this when we don't understand this. That's why I'm wondering if Mr. T-Rex has a name, 'cause I believe his name is going to be something you need to know to get where you aren't so afraid of him, and then you won't need to have him around to remind you of what it is you are really afraid of. He's just the messenger, in other words."

Wills Sue frowns. "You some kind of psychologist, or something?" She'd had all she could take of psychologists, or something, when she was in the mental place.

"Mary Lou taught me about dreams. She was the psychologist, or something."

Riley now flashes to the recurring jack crevalle dream. It looked like a pompano but wasn't. It tasted almost like a pompano... Shit! Now he knows what the dream means, and that causes him to wish he hadn't figured it out. And that truly frightens him. It frightens him not because he dreads being with Willa Sue, but because he dreads not being with Mary Lou instead. It was simple to love Mary Lou, even when she was messing with his mind and feelings, running away all of those times. But will it be simple to be with Willa Sue, when she messes with his mind and feelings? Or tries to break his bones, or tries to kill him? T-Rex is a big dude, and he probably will do everything he can to bust Riley. And no telling what else lives in that other half of Willa Sue. *And in the other half of you, my*

dearest. And that truly terrifies him.

As if they have made love again, Riley and Willa Sue both conk out, and dream. Riley is confounded to find himself being chased by a Tyrannosaurus Rex, who keeps shouting after him, "Hey, tough guy, love your enemies as yourself!" Then the beast's face shape changes into that of Lyndon Baines Johnson, who brought American Vietnam and killed Jack. Even as Willa Sue stops running from her T-Rex and turns and shouts, hands on hips, "Okay, buster, what's your fucking name?!!!" Buster stops, smiles, bows. "Why I'm Lucifer, Willa Sue, and how do you do? Wanna dance?" Then his countenance changes, and he is Harlan. She awakens, laughing hysterically, as Riley awakens, struggling really hard not to scream "Jesus fucking Christ!!!!!"

Fame and Fortune

While I probably could force myself to tell every little detail of how Riley and Willa Sue wrote *two* books and got all that weight off her, and how they loved and fought their way there over the contract period, and how many demons were exorcised out of them, I think doing that would bore the stuffings out of me and also out of you most likely. Even if it didn't bore the stuffings out of you, you might not believe or like it if I were to tell it all, unless you already had a similar experience. In which case, you would completely appreciate their desire for some degree of privacy. Some things that pass between a man and a woman are for God's eyes only.

Besides, you know they are going to get there anyway, otherwise there would be no way to make this into a book worth reading. And you already got the gist of how this kind of Providential healing goes, from reading about Riley and Mary Lou, and about Riley and Willa Sue so far. So and despite it being highly irregular for an author to just step into a story like God and break a major literary taboo, it's the author's story to tell in the way his inner Muse tells him to tell it. If he tells it any other way, then it won't come out right for him, or for her. It's like Adam and Eve all over again, but this time they are geeing and hawing instead of the other. That's why this story takes up again in a notorious venue where some of the more critical missing parts are going to be filled in.

Riley and Willa Sue got invited to appear on *Oprah* by virtue of Ronnie Davis sending the completed manuscripts of KILL ***ALL*** THE LAWYERS?????, by Riley Strange, Ex-Lawyer, and ONLY FOOLS RUSH IN, by Willa Sue Jenkins and Riley Strange, to Oprah. Accompanying the two manuscripts was a two-page summary of how Riley lost Mary Lou and went nuts and quit practicing law, how he and Willa Sue met, the deal they made, what they then did about that deal, and how Willa Sue, now a raving beautiful spitting image of the dearlydeparted fallen angel, Mary Lou Snow (photos of both women enclosed), fell madly in love with her captor who did not fall madly in love with her, but loves her sanely instead. The summary began with a quip Willa Sue dreamed up to play on the title: *Only fools rush in where angels fear to tread, but if there were no fools, who'd lead the angels?*" It was the stuff that lit Oprah's soul and show biz fires to blazing.

So here the three now sit in Oprah's studio before the camera, about to make Riley and Willa Sue world famous fools, and about to make every major publisher on earth lust after Riley's bible for clients of lawyers, and for his and Willa Sue's bible for men and women who are tired of living like

Adam and Eve did after they fell from grace. Not only has Willa Sue ended up earning the Alabama lottery, she and Riley are going to win the best-seller lottery, twice. And that's before the blockbuster movie is made, yet another lottery.

Oprah begins by introducing her guests and then summarizing their saga. Off to the side are life-size enlargements of photos of Mary Lou and of Willa Sue just after she met Riley. Oprah has promoted this particular show on three earlier shows in the week, to build suspense and attract viewers.

The camera zooms to Oprah's left onto the seated Willa Sue, dressed in a long, black silk dress, sprinkled with dark-green embroidered lilies and cranes. V-neck, some cleavage shows. Black, flat-soled Oriental shoes. Her wavy black hair is bobbed Japanese style, tied with dark-green ribbon. On her ears dangle two white pearl earrings, and around her neck a white pearl necklace. She has a plain gold band on her left ring finger. Her nails are clear. She wears no lipstick or other makeup. She refused to be made up for the camera.

The camera next closes on Willa Sue's before photo, in white shorts and an un-tucked blue blouse, hair in pig tails. Then the camera goes to Mary Lou, in a full calico dress and red sandals. Her wavy hair is done up in French braids. A daffodil is stuck in her hair over her left ear. A gold ring, seashell necklace and earrings for jewelry. No nail polish or makeup.

The camera now shifts to Oprah's right onto Riley, who also has no makeup. A head taller than Willa Sue, he wears a trim dark blue Kashmir blazer, white golf shirt, light grey wool slacks, and burgandy topsiders. His salt-and-pepper hair, which he cuts himself with left-handed scissors Mary Lou gave to him because he never liked the way his barber or she cut his hair, is medium cropped and combed to show a left-hand part. He wears a plain gold band on his left ring finger.

Oprah turns to Willa Sue, says, "Now that I've told the audience and the viewers out there the gist of your story, I would like to focus here on some of the particulars, if that's okay with you two."

Willa Sue looks at Riley, who nods assent. She says, "Sure, Oprah. Fire away."

"Okay, I'll go right for the jugular. Willa Sue, when did you first know that you loved Riley? Was it love at first sight? Did it take a while to happen?" The camera zooms in on Willa Sue head-on.

"Naw, love at first fu...oops, well, you know how that is, don't you? I'd never had good sex before, and it set me off like all the fireworks in heaven and on earth. The ground shook. I died and went to heaven." The look on Opra's face says she might not know.

Undaunted, Oprah continues the interview. "Well, was it easy for you after that?"

Riley laughs, nods to Willa Sue to continue to speak for them both.

"Naw, it wasn't easy after that. We fought like dogs and cats as much as not."

"Heaven on earth, then fighting like dogs and cats?" Oprah asks.

"Yep, both."

"So how'd you fight, if you don't mind my prying a bit?"

"Well, I'd mostly try to kill Riley. Choke him. Hit him. Kick him. Butt him. Didn't have anything in the gym to hit him with. If there had been something, I woulda used it though."

"Really?"

"Really. I'd get so mad I'd go crazy. Went on like that for months. I got better at trying to kill Riley after I started learning karate. He's fourth degree black belt. Knows all about hurting people. Wasn't so smart, him teaching me karate. Made it harder to defend himself. After the first month and I was not getting so sore from the training, we did karate twice a day. Got to where I could break boards with my hands, knees and feet, and with my head." She smiles the kind of smile that says she can break bones too.

"It's a wonder you both survived," Oprah throws an askance look into the camera.

"Warn't no wonder. God wanted us to survive. Made it a sure thing, as I see it."

Oprah is taken back momentarily, then says it's time for a station break.

Back on camera Oprah changes gears. "Tell us how you lost the weight, Willa Sue."

"Well, besides the karate and working out on Riley's machines in the gym he and Mary Lou had built, we made love just about every day, sometimes two or three times."

Oprah looks knowingly at the camera.

"And the food we ate helped. Though I hated it at first, all those vegetables Riley grew out in the garden he and Mary Lou had made. But in time I got to like vegetables and now I eat that way without him making me do it."

"I've often tried that diet, but it never seems to stop me from gaining weight again. I imagine the craziness had a lot to do with you gaining weight in the first place. Is that right?"

"That's what I think, Oprah. I gained it all after getting out of the mental place. I was a skinny kid before I went there, then I got fat after I got out."

Oprah turns to the audience, says, "I've read reports by respected mental health specialists who claim that as much as eighty percent of obese people were sexually abused in childhood, and either aren't talking about it to their therapists or don't remember it even happening, like what happened to Willa Sue."

Oprah's countenance suddenly changes, as if she just had an *aha!* experience. It's not lost on Riley or Willa Sue, or on most of the audience, that Oprah perhaps has realized the truth that will set her free. But she recovers, asks, "What was the healing like, Willa Sue?"

"Something was always setting me off. Either something Riley said, or something I said and he said something back. Or I would have a dream I didn't like. Or I'd just get out of sorts and wouldn't even know why. Then I'd go crazy, then we'd fight, then we'd be making up, making love, and I'd fall right back in love with him again. Then I'd go crazy again, and we'd fight, make up, make love, be in

love. Like being in a tornado, then being in heaven. Back and forth. Back and forth. All them demons coming up out of me...and out of him, too."

"What demons came out of you, Riley?" Oprah turns, as the camera closes to him head-on.

"At first, it was the death of my brother Jack, in Vietnam. The family never got over it. Poisoned us. Killed my folks. I'm sure it affected how I got along with my wives before Mary Lou came along and began to heal me. Awful, with those wives. Awful for my kids too. They still don't want anything to do with me. But I don't worry about that now."

"How can you not worry about your children not wanting to have anything to do with you?" Oprah asks, looking incredulous. The camera leaves her and goes back to Riley.

"Can't explain it, Oprah. Just got over it. Besides, what can I do if they don't want to have anything to do with me? All I ever had they seemed to want was money. I guess that was because they never got the love from me they needed. I had money and I could give them that. I gave them and their mother plenty of money, actually, until they got old enough to not need for me to take care of them anymore. Then I quit sending money and that's when they didn't seem to want to have anymore to do with me. Saw that happen to lot of other men in my law practice, whose divorces I'd handled."

"What did your children, or even your ex-wives do when you won the lottery? Or rather, when Mary Lou won it, then you inherited it the next day?" Oprah asks.

"Never told them about it. They all had moved to other states, with money I had given them. Maybe they never found out."

"Well, they are going to find out about it now, don't you think?"

"Yep, they sure are. But it doesn't matter, because it's Willa Sue's money now."

"Are you glad you gave all the money to her?" The camera again zooms in on him head-on.

This time Riley looks dead into the camera. "Sure. Never wanted the money in the first place. Begged Mary Lou not to go claim it. We got into a huge fight over it. How could I keep the money after that and after she died bringing it home? Even before I met Will Sue I was trying to figure out how to give it away."

Oprah shakes her head, perhaps disbelief, or perhaps wonderment.

Station break.

Back on camera, Oprah turns back to Willa Sue. "Did Riley ever hurt you?"

The camera closes on Willa Sue's face. "Naw, not really. He only used the kind of karate that tells you to stop what you're doing or get yourself hurt real bad. Or he'd throw a blanket over me and wrap me up in that till the craziness got out of me again. Or he'd leave and lock the door and come back later after I got over it. He usually came back with flowers he cut from the garden. I really liked those flowers. And sometimes he came back with something new for me to wear that made me pretty. As the

weight came off, the old clothes didn't fit no more. And the more weight came off, the more clothes he brought me."

"Who picked out what you are wearing today, Willa Sue?" The camera retreats, to take in Willa Sue's ensemble.

"Riley helped me pick it out."

"When you were in the thick of it, did Riley ever get mad at you? Yell? Threaten?"

"Yeah, he got mad. He yelled sometimes. But mostly he just argued. Tried to talk sense into me."

"But did he ever threaten you?"

"No, Oprah, never."

"Never?" Oprah casts an incredulous look toward the camera, which then zooms in on Willa Sue, a paragon of innocence wrapped around blue steel.

"Well, Riley did say that if I somehow got aloose and went home, I might get locked up in the mental place again by my family. And then I wouldn't get the lottery money because I broke the contract we made. That was a threat he often made."

"Well, did you know Riley was going to lock you up when he took you to his home in Alabama?"

"No, he didn't tell me he had doing that in mind until we got there and he locked me up in the gym and said I would be there for the whole year or until I lost one-half of my weight."

"How'd you feel about hearing that, Willa Sue?"

"It really pissed me off, er, made me mad. I wanted to leave. That's when Riley first told me what might happen to me when my family saw me again. And that's when I first tried to choke him."

Station break.

Back on camera, Oprah turns to Willa Sue. "Tell us about the mental place."

"The one I was in, or the one Riley was in?"

"The one you were in."

"Well, as you already said to begin with, it had to do with my brother Harlan having sex with me and me trying to stop it and they all said I was always crazy anyway and nobody ever believed me and the judge said he believed I was crazy and he put me in there with people who really are crazy and I felt like I was going really crazy myself and I got mad at the doctor and tried to kick him, then he put me in the bubble where I couldn't hurt myself because the walls are padded and I went crazy in there

and passed out or something, and when I woke up I didn't remember any of it. The doctor said I was getting well, and finally he let me go home. My family never said anything about why I was in the hospital, and I didn't ask. I was afraid to ask, to tell the truth, because I figured something must have been bad wrong with me, if I couldn't even remember why I was sent away."

"You didn't remember what Harlan had done to you, or being in court, or being put away?" Incredulous look.

"No, Oprah, none of it."

"When did you remember it, then?"

"After Riley locked me in the gym. I wanted to kill him and went crazy, and it all started coming back."

Oprah looks at the audience, says, "We have had other people on the show who said they suddenly remembered traumas they had experienced years earlier. Then a lot of things that had bothered them that doctors couldn't do anything about suddenly got better."

Turning to Willa Sue, Oprah asks, "So, did things suddenly get better for you after you remembered?"

"No, they started getting better then, but it took almost the whole year for it to really be better."

"So Riley really did honor his contract with you? He looked after you for a year, then he gave you all of that money for losing how much weight?"

"One-hundred-twenty-five pounds, Oprah. One-half of what I weighed when we met."

"So for losing one-hundred-twenty-five pounds you got fourteen million dollars?" Incredulous look again.

"Yes, Oprah. It's all in my name."

Besides Riley, Willa Sue and the Tortolan Bank, only Ronnie Davis know where the account is, in Willa Sue's name, with Ronnie as alternative signatory. Being Willa Sue's lawyer, Ronnie can not disclose anything about the account, or anything he knows about Riley and Willa Sue, to anybody, without breaching attorney-client confidentiality. Not even the IRS can make Ronnie tell what he knows. Nor can any court make Riley tell where the account is, because he and Willa Sue are now married, and spouses cannot be made to tell on spouses.

"How did it come to pass that you two decided to get married?" Opra now asks Riley.

"It was Willa Sue's idea. She asked me about it a lot of times, actually, but I kept saying we needed to wait until the year was up. I was still really hung up on Mary Lou. She was coming to me, talking to me about things. She still does that. Well, maybe I shouldn't say that but it's true. It wasn't the same with Willa Sue as it was with Mary Lou. Something special seemed to be missing, even after Willa Sue's weight really dropped and everything else was starting to go good. And yet, I really was

fond of Willa Sue and I admired her a lot for what she was doing for herself. I wanted her to win. Get the money. She darn well deserved it. Maybe she would find a man who loved her the way I loved Mary Lou. But Willa Sue said she wanted me no matter how much I still loved Mary Lou. Mary Lou helped me to say yes, if you want to know what pushed me over the edge. She said I would never replace her and I needed to get on with my life and live it as fully as I could. She said I'd been with several other women before her and I liked Willa Sue better than any of them by a long shot. She was right."

"But it's still not as...great now as it was with Mary Lou?" Opra asks.

"No, it's not. But I'm still glad Willa Sue wants to be with me. And I want to be with her. I love her. Only it's different." How different, only he could ever know.

Station break.

Back on camera Oprah asks how they came to write their books. Riley says he was thinking about it even before he went nuts and into Hillcrest Hospital. He felt it was a good way to exit a rewarding trial law career, by writing a book about what it really was like to be a trial lawyer. Needing to stay around his home, with Willa Sue locked up, that was a good time to write it.

"Why do you now call yourself an 'ex-lawyer' rather than a retired lawyer," Oprah asks.

Riley smiles, "Because I got disbarred when I tried to retire. I had done seven of the twelve required hours of continuing legal education, one for each month of that year. I wasn't going to practice law anymore and I sure as heck didn't want to go to any more courses to learn more about what I wasn't going to do any more. So I sent in my law license I asked to be excused from the other five hours. The Alabama Bar wrote back that the Standards of Professional Practice require that a lawyer complete all twelve hours in any year in which he practices, to remain in good standing with the Bar. I could not resign in good standing until I did the other five hours. I wrote back that I thought they were picking hairs, but they wouldn't back off, so I asked them to let the Alabama Supreme Court decide it. The justices ruled against me, said the law was the law. But first they tried to persuade me to finish out the five hours in a reasonable amount of time. Heck, they all knew me. Either we had tried cases together or against each other, or I had argued cases on appeal before them. Kinda felt sorry for them, actually. But I was determined to leave the practice with no strings, and I told them to disbar me. And that's how I got to be an ex-lawyer."

"You don't miss the law, or wish you had left a door open to go back into it?" Oprah asks, looking somewhat disbelieving.

"Nope. I told the justices that I'd made my fortune fair and square in the legal lottery, and now was bored with the practice and had other things to do. If that wasn't radical enough for them, I added that disbaring me would be a favor, just in case I later lost my mind and decided I wanted to be a lawyer again. It's rather difficult for disbarred lawyers to get their licenses back. And so that's how I killed one lawyer— me." Laughter and applause from the audience.

"Riley, can I read some of your book to the audience?" He nods.

Oprah starts with the Author's Preface, about Adam and Eve and Cain and lawyers being the

first messiah. This brings a big laugh from the audience.

Then she shifts to the part about what might be done to Willa Sue's family and lawyer, if they try to mess with her about the money. Oprah is in complete agreement that the family needs to be headed off at the pass, for Oprah has fallen in love with Willa Sue, as has everyone in the audience. Everyone but Harlan, who just happens to be watching his sister tell all before the whole world. And does that jerk his chain so bad that it never occurs to him until the show is over that he could have recorded it. Not to worry, the show is being recorded in several homes in Apalachicola and by nightfall wagging tongues will take the message throughout the county and into adjoining counties.

Oprah says it's time for another station break.

Back on camera.

"So, newly weds, how did you come to write a book together?"

Riley nods to Willa Sue. "Well, Riley had his book and I really like to read books and I decided we ought to write our own book. So that's what we did."

"Did you do the writing, then?" Oprah asks.'

"No, we talked about what we wanted to next say, then Riley wrote it, like he wrote his book—he a typing wiz and spells right. Then he would read it to me and I would say what I thought, then I would read it to him because he said it made a difference to hear it read back to him instead of reading it himself. Then he wrote it again, then we went on to the next piece of it. That's how both books were written."

"When did you start your book together?"

"About half way into the contract. By then, Riley's book was done."

"Do you own this book together?"

"No. Riley gave it to me."

Oprah is falling in love with Riley too, but cautiously. He had some nerve selling Willa Sue on getting the lottery money without telling her what all she would have to do to get there. Some nerve. But then, if he had told all going in, would any of it have happened? That is how Oprah plans to wrap up today's truly unique show. She has decided not to mention the fact that Ronnie Davis' initial letter offered her a twenty-five percent literary agent's commission on all book and movie royalties.

Fool for a Client

Sue Yates watches Oprah every day. Sue Yates is bored. Sam never got paid by the Jenkins for having Willa Sue put away. Sue always resented that. She also resents how beautiful Willa Sue now is, and how rich she is, and what a great husband she now has. She can hardly wait to replay Oprah for

Sam when he gets home from work. There really is a God, Sue thinks to herself. Now maybe God and Sam can figure out how to get some of that loot for Sue.

Although Sam Yates is not in the same lawyer league as Riley, he sees up front the mess Riley has made of any normal plans he or the Jenkins might hatch to get their hands on the loot. However, Sam is not an idiot either. He sees a snag in Riley's plan to head the Jenkins, thus Sam, off at the pass. A snag that most any second-year law student would spot, proving for fact certain that anyone who has himself for a lawyer indeed has a fool for a client.

The Jenkins come in to Sam's office the day after watching a home video recording of *Oprah* kindly furnished by a neighbor. Upon learning that Sam has also seen a video of the program, they demand that he sue Riley for libel and that he get Willa Sue put back into the mental place and have the court order that her money be turned over to them as her legal guardians.

The door wide open, Sam says, "Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins, I first need to be paid what you owe me from before. It don't set well with me, or with my wife, for me to work hard for somebody then they don't pay or even let me know why they aren't paying. Which is what you two did. It's not the Christian thing to do."

"How much is it, Sam. I forgot the amount," Orian says sheepishly. He had wanted to pay it, or at least start paying it over time, but Betty had said it wasn't right that they had to pay money for what the State ought have done for them when Willa Sue went crazy. Being a Christian and all, Sam should have done it out of the goodness of his heart, Betty had argued. So they never paid a dime on the bill.

"Two thousand four hundred fifty dollars, Orian. You were billed that several times," Sam says matter-of-factly.

"We don't have that much," Betty says.

Sam looks at how the couple is dressed. Orian is in coveralls and a frayed work shirt. Betty is wearing a plain beige cotton dress. Doesn't look like she's been going to the beauty parlor. Orian's fingernails are dirty. Betty's are cut short.

"Well, how much can you pay?"

"Maybe a thousand. Maybe." Betty says.

"Okay, pay me that today, and I'll take the rest of what you owe me out of whatever we recover. I'll also get one-third of what we recover, if there is no trial. One-half, if there is a trial."

Orian looks at Betty. She nods assent. "Okay, Sam, I'll bring the thousand from the bank after we leave here today, and you put the other in writing for us to get a copy when you get the thousand."

"Will do, Orian." Whew! Sam never expected to see a dime of that money, because he wasn't about to sue a client for an unpaid fee. And the reason for that is sitting right in front of him. Had he sued them, then they would never have brought him this whopper of a case. Sue never could understand turning the other cheek in that way. If money was involved, you don't turn the other cheek. That only applies to being hit by someone, she claimed. *Women*.

"So what do you think, Sam?" Orian asks.

"Well, I've got some concerns that ought to be said first."

"What are they?" Betty asks.

"Lawyer Strange ain't no dummy. And I imagine he's got suing-kindsof-lawyer friends who could make your lives really miserable. And my life miserable. And if they sue old Judge Crowley about Willa Sue being put away, then Judge Crowley will have to remove himself from the case and a probate judge from some other county will have to be brought to Gulf County to hear the new case. The new judge might not be as partial to you as Judge Crowley is."

Orian starts to speak, but Sam raises his hand to halt that. "I'm just getting started here. Hear me out, then ask your questions."

"Okay, Sam, go ahead," Orian says.

"Do you think Harlan is willing to take a polygraph or be interviewed by a psychiatrist and given a bunch of tests that I don't imagine I'm even smart enough to outfox?"

Silence from the Jenkins.

"Are you willing to put Harlan in jeopardy of being investigated for raping his own sister?"

More silence.

"Are you willing to put yourselves in jeopardy of being investigated as accomplices after the fact to rape?"

Betty Jenkins' eyebrows lift. Orian looks down at his shoes.

"Are you willing to put yourselves in jeopardy of being investigated by the U.S. Attorney up in Tallahassee for violating Willa Sue's civil rights by having her committed, instead of having Harlan arrested?"

This time Sam's hand stops Betty about to bust wide open. "Please let me finish this."

She fights back the urge to blow up, then stares grimly ahead. "Go ahead, Sam," Orian says softly.

"Are you willing to live with all that publicity in the newspapers for what will seem like forever?"

Orian and Betty Jenkin sit there in defeated silence. Good. Now it's time to start selling them on the case that will make them all wonderfully rich.

"Right now, nobody but Harlan's been accused of doing something legally wrong. That Bible stuff won't hold up in court. But if Harlan files suit for libel, or if you file suit to have Willa Sue committed again, then she's going to have better lawyers than the last time and she's going to be

allowed by the judge to do whatever her lawyers dream up to prove Harlan had sex with her. If they ask for Harlan to be examined by a psychiatrist, it will happen. But they cannot force Harlan to take a lie-detector test. However, if he refuses, the word will get out all over Gulf County and every potential juror will know about it. And in their minds that will be about the same as Harlan saying he did have sex with Willa Sue."

Orian asks, "Can they really do all of that?"

"Yep," Sam warns.

"How about all that other stuff they threatened to do?"

"They can try to do it," Sam holds the line.

"Is it legal?"

"Doesn't matter if it's legal or not, Orian. They can file any lawsuit they wish to file, then it will be up to a judge and maybe a jury to decide if it was right. They can go to the U.S. Attorney and file a complaint, then see what comes from that. In the meantime, you and Mrs. Jenkins will be dragged through the depths of hell, and Harlan might not be any too happy about it either, or his wife and children."

"It just ain't right that a man could do something like that," Orian laments.

"No, it ain't right," Sam agrees, wishing he had had the chance and he would now be in Argentina with all the loot and some hot young lady, away from Sue forever. "But that's how it is."

"Do you think they would really do it?" Orian asks.

"Yep. A lawyer I know up in Dothan checked with some of Lawyer Strange's lawyer friends in Birmingham. They all say that no lawyer in Birmingham cares to be against him in a case. He doesn't quit and he usually wins."

"Well, he ain't a lawyer no more," Betty says.

"No, but his law firm is full of suing-kind-of lawyers who are his friends and who are a lot like him, I imagine."

Orian looks to Betty, who asks Sam, "What do you think we ought to do, then?"

Lawyer Yates turns his swivel chair and looks out the window at the ancient live oak growing in the yard of the house he bought years ago to convert into a country law office. Spanish moss hangs off the branches. Sam loves that tree. Sometimes he comes in at night to sit here and look out the window at the tree and the stars and moon beyond it. Sometimes that's when he gets his best ideas.

He swivels back to his clients, says, "Judge Crowley ruled that Willa Sue is mentally incompetent. That ruling still stands. Lawyer Strange and Willa Sue have admitted on television that they had sex and that Lawyer Strange knew she was ruled mentally incompetent by a judge. It's against the law for a man to have sex with a mentally incompetent woman, even if he doesn't know she is

mentally incompetent. That's called rape. It's also against the law for a man to talk a woman into going away with him across a state line to do prostitution or for debauchery or for any other immoral purpose. That's a violation of a federal law called the Mann Act. Some people call it the White Slave Act."

Orian leans forward in growing interest, as Betty smiles.

"It's also against the law for a man to trick a woman into going away

with him, then lock the woman up and scare her into doing what he wants her to do. That's called kidnapping. Penitentiaries are where you put men who do those kinds of things. Being that you are Willa Sue's parents and legal guardians, you can go to the sheriff and swear out a warrant for Lawyer Strange's arrest. And you can go up to the U.S. Attorney's office in Tallahassee and ask him to investigate Lawyer Strange and have him indicted."

"Then let's do that," Betty says angrily. She's mighty upset to have such a beautiful, rich and ungrateful daughter saying she was raped by her upstanding and hardworking brother Harlan, whose children are the apples of their grandmother's eyes. And Betty's even madder at that Lawyer Strange for putting Willa Sue up to it.

But what Betty Jenkins next says is, "It really ain't Willa Sue's fault. We all know she's teched in the head. It's that evil Lawyer Strange that something needs to be done about."

Sam nods, waits.

"And how's Willa Sue going to take care of all that money, being teched in the head and all. Somebody who loves her and won't take advantage of her needs to be the one to do that," Betty continues.

Sam looks at Orian, who says, "What do you think, Sam? You're our lawyer."

Pleased to be back in charge, Sam says, "Lawyer Strange already said in his book what he plans to do to us if we try to go after Willa Sue or her money. So why don't we tell him what we plan to do to him if Willa Sue doesn't come home and bring her money for you to look after it for her."

"What do we plan to do to him?" Betty asks.

"Why, we plan to have Lawyer Strange arrested and put into prison, that's what we plan to do. If Willa Sue really loves him as much as she says she does, she isn't going to let us put her beloved into prison. She'll want to make a deal."

"What do you figure are the chances of us putting Lawyer Strange in prison, if this goes all the way?" Orian asks.

"Oh, 'bout fifty-fifty."

"And what do you figure the odds to be of them winning the cases they said they would file?"

"'Bout the same," Sam says.

"Sounds like a Mexican standoff," Orian says.

"Yeah, something like that."

"If we go after Lawyer Strange, do you think he'll go after us, after Harlan?" Orian asks.

"If he doesn't, Willa Sue probably will," Sam says.

"But she's crazy," Betty breaks in. "She can't do nothing legal like."

"Oh, she can sure try, especially with all that money she has available, and the lawyers the lottery money or Lawyer Strange's money will buy. But that won't stop the district attorney from prosecuting Lawyer Strange. Two different cases altogether. They can come after you but not stop the district attorney's case against Lawyer Strange. That's why I don't think Willa Sue will risk having her husband put in prison. She will cut a deal if we threaten to have him arrested."

Sam pauses, then decides to tell the rest. "But there's a problem threatening to have him arrested. It's illegal to threaten someone with criminal prosecution, to force him to give you money. So we need to be careful how we go about it."

"So, how do we go about it, Sam?" Betty grumbles.

"I'd go about it by writing to Lawyer Strange and telling him I represent Willa Sue's parents who are mighty upset about what he did to their daughter, tricking her like that, imprisoning her like that. I would list the crimes Lawyer Strange has committed and ask that he or his lawyer contact me about making arrangements for Willa Sue to be returned immediately to her legal guardians who are also her loving parents. Strange will come back wanting to know what we really want not to take it any farther. I assume you really don't care if Willa Sue comes back or not, as long as you get paid for it."

Betty's hatred fills the room. She looks at Orian, who never was sure what really happened to Willa Sue. He never could bring himself to believe she had ruptured her own hymen, or, at twelve years old, had had sex with some other boy and then had tried to blame it on Harlan. But Betty Jenkins had a real mean streak in her that Orian, being her husband, knew all too well. He had seen that mean streak in Harlan. Even Jake was wary of that mean streak in his younger brother. But Betty Jenkins ruled the roost in the Jenkins family and it was best not to cross her if a man wanted to stay out of hell's way. So Orian had let Betty run the inquisition against Willa Sue.

As for now, Lawyer Strange didn't behave none too well lying to Willa Sue about what he had in mind doing to her when he tricked her into going away with him. And it just wasn't right for a man to try to make a woman replace another woman in the first place. And for sure not by buying her off. And it wasn't right for Willa Sue to let herself be bought off. Why that's just being a whore. And the Bible don't like whores none at all. And here's Willa Sue, his own daughter, the highest paid whore in the world! Something's got to be done to make her know she done wrong, so she won't think she got clean away with it. If she can't be gotten to, then the next best thing is to get to the man who put her up to it in the first place.

Orian nods assent, but says, "I got another question, Sam."

Sam nods to continue.

"If Willa Sue's crazy under Judge Crowley's ruling, is Lawyer Strange also crazy under that probate judge's ruling up in Birmingham?"

"Hmmm. Didn't think of that angle yet." Sam pushes his reading glasses up on top of his head and turns back to look at the live oak. Looking at the tree he says, "Hmmm. Let's see how this could go if Lawyer Strange is crazy. He can be put into a mental place for the criminally insane. By God, that might be an even better angle. Prison is terrible. But the other, I hear tell, is a lot worse. After being in a mental place herself and not liking it, I doubt Willa Sue will want her husband going to one. Glad you brought that up, Orian. Gives us more leverage against them. A lot more leverage. Like a double-barreled shotgun."

"Do it, Sam," Betty commands.

"Got another question," Orian says quietly.

"Then ask him!" Betty snaps.

"Can a crazy man make a deal like the one Lawyer Strange made with Willa Sue?"

"Well, not really," Sam concedes.

So if Lawyer Strange is crazy, then the lottery money still belongs to him?"

"Well, you've got another good point there, Orian. Maybe we need to trade places and you be the lawyer," Sam chuckles nervously, wondering why he hasn't already seen this himself?

Orian turns to Betty, says, "I think it's best for the money to go back to Lawyer Strange because he's crazy. Willa Sue is a painted woman if she gets to keep it. A sinner. She'll go to hell. We got to save her from that."

Sam suddenly feels sick to his stomach. But that is cured by Betty cutting in and saying, "Orian, you ain't thinking straight. Willa Sue's teched in the head. Teched-in-the-head people can't be sinners, ain't that right Sam?"

"Well, that's a good point, too," Sam breathes more easily. "Crazy people aren't responsible under the law for crimes or other bad things they do. So I don't imagine the Lord holds them accountable either."

"Do what you got to do, Sam, to get us Willa Sue back so she can be properly taken care of, and the money to do it with," Betty says, throwing a don't-you-say-another-word look at Orian.

Sam watches Orian, who nods assent. He figures God will work it out somehow, and he'd rather Betty be mad at God or Sam, than at him.

After the Jenkins leave to get the thousand dollars, Sam types the contingency contract and the letter to Lawyer Strange on his word processor. When the Jenkins return half hour later with ten hundreds, Sam swaps the two letters for the cash, which he sticks into his wallet. Tax free income Sue

will never know about, but a young lady over in Carabelle will enjoy having some of it spent on her next time Sam makes up a good excuse to go over there about a case he's not handling.

Later that same afternoon, Sam walks over to the post office and drops the letter in the mail to Lawyer Strange care of his old law firm, the address of which Sam pulled out of Martindale-Hubbel, the legal directory for lawyers in the United States.

Unknown to Sam, the Jenkins, or Willa Sue and Riley, Jeb Bush has just called the Attorney General of the State of Florida and has asked for a full investigation of Riley Strange, ex-lawyer, with a view toward full prosecution under applicable State criminal statutes. Governor Bush and his wife both believe that Riley Strange, no matter what the benefit to Willa Sue Jenkins, is an evil man who needs to be taken out of circulation. Governor Bush and his wife also want him to be fined a very large sum of money, which fine will go into the State of Florida treasury and be used to help the God-fearing folks of their proud state fight crime.

Governor Bush next calls his brother in Washington, and asks that the U.S. Attorney General be asked to see if there are federal laws that have been violated. George W. Bush, like his brother Jeb and their father George, all see this as a golden opportunity for the Bushes to demonstrate that America is indeed one nation, under God. They are God's chosen instruments to be tough on crime of any kind, especially this kind perpetuated by a gunslinger lawyer who made a fortune suing patriotic American companies that support Republican Party views and candidates, then wrote a book about it that will make him yet another fortune.

Three days later, Riley retrieves from the law firm the letter from Sam Yates, Attorney at law.

Dear Mr. Strange:

I represent the parents of Willa Sue Jenkins, who recently appeared with you on the Oprah Winfrey Show. That's how they learned what had become of their beloved daughter, who was ruled *non compos mentis* under a probate decision in Gulf County, Florida, quite a few years before you abducted her for your own nefarious ends.

I have advised my clients that you have committed several crimes under Florida and United States criminal statutes. They demand that you return Willa Sue to them immediately, and once that is done they will decide what to do next. Please let me hear of your intentions within ten days from this letter's date, either from you directly or from your attorney.

Yours truly,

Sam Yates

"What do we do now, Riley?" Willa Sue asks.

"Don't suppose you want to go back to Port St. Joe and your family?"

"Just kidding, Willa Sue," headed off her hauling off and knocking him silly.

"I'll give Lawyer Yates a call, see what he really wants. As if I don't already know."

"Money?"

"Right."

Yates plays it real cool. Keeps asking Riley his intentions. Never offers anything from his clients except their determination to see justice done.

"What is the cost of this justice they want?" Riley asks.

"Cost? You offering money for their daughter? For what you did to her?"

"I'm not offering anything, but I suspect that's what they want me to do, Lawyer," Riley counters.

"They want their daughter back, Mr. Strange."

"Then I guess they might want to come up her and try to take her back, because she's made it very plain that she doesn't want to go back. She's a grown woman and I'm not going to tie her up and bring her there and commit any more crimes than what you think I already did."

"Mr. Strange, you leave my clients with no other choice but to swear out a warrant for your arrest in both state and federal venues."

"Have at it, Lawyer. But if there is one whiff out of you or them about being paid money for them to drop this and forget about it, I'll have you before the Florida Bar Grievance Committee faster than you can get there to tell them the grievance is coming. And I will have you and your clients before the U.S. Attorney for interstate extortion. Won't be bothering to have you prosecuted in your home county, where I'm sure there would be plenty home cooking served. No, I would put you before a federal judge where state politics and values are basically irrelevant, as you well know. Go back to your clients and tell them the bluff didn't work and we aren't going to offer them a penny to go away and forget about it.

"Tell them also that if they abduct Willa Sue, then they will be facing the same kind of criminal charges you have told them I could be facing. That probate case down there stinks of home cooking, and no federal or state court judge in Birmingham would take kindly to your clients taking the law into their own hands. To get Willa Sue back down there, you will have to go through the courts to do it, and we will resist you every inch of the way. By the time it's all said and done, Harlan will be charged with rape and his parents will be charged with being accomplices after the fact and criminal and civil violation of their daughter's civil rights. Then I will tell your clients to sue you for malpractice and I'll be their star witness.

"I'm recording this conversation and the Jenkins will be the very first to receive a copy of it if anything out of order happens to Willa Sue or to me. And the second person to receive a copy will be the U.S. Attorney in Birmingham, and the third will be the Florida Bar Grievance Committee. Do you hear

me loud and clear, Lawyer?"

"You don't scare me, Mr. Strange," Sam Yates replies.

"Nor do you scare me, Lawyer. Willa Sue is the most popular woman in America right now. I'd hate to be your defense lawyer trying to strike a jury that's about to judge what you or your clients did to Willa Sue. Or to her husband, who saved her from what you and your clients and their nasty son Harlan did to her. You don't have enough malpractice coverage to protect yourself from such a case.

"In case you haven't figured it out yet, Lawyer, people like sharks and snakes more than they like lawyers. Not even the devil likes lawyers. And you will surely find that out if you become a defendant in the kind of case I've described here today. Now I've got to run along and let Willa Sue know you are going to be a good lawyer and do this by the book and are going to tell her folks to do the same. But if you don't say now that you're going to do it that way, I'm going to send copies of this tape recording on to the places mentioned above, and let those powers that be deal with this. So what's it going to be?"

"I'll let you know."

"By tomorrow, or the tape goes out."

"By tomorrow."

Sam Yates doesn't figure Riley is bluffing. He figures Riley is crazy and is not bluffing. This is not a good development. Not a good development at all. No matter how they go at it, short of prosecuting Strange, Harlan is going to be X-rayed. As will be his parents. As will be Sam Yates. Shit, it might end up back on Oprah. There is only one chance: make a local deal to prosecute Strange in Gulf County for kidnapping and subsequent rape, but have it understood by the sheriff and district attorney that the case will be dropped on petition by the family. Once formally charged with his crimes and extradition process begins, Strange will offer a deal.

The Jenkins agree to this upon hearing from Sam that the sheriff and district attorney have already agreed to join in a dismissal, if Willa Sue's parents ask for it, and upon being assured by Sam that Strange will still be vulnerable to federal criminal charges being brought against him. For local law enforcement officials have no standing to cut a deal for the Feds, and vice versa, the Feds have no standing to cut a deal for the locals. Strange will get some really strange home cooking, as he calls it. Maybe he isn't so smart after all.

Riley isn't exactly surprised the next day to hear from Sam that he will be prosecuted in Florida if he does not return Willa Sue. And Sam Yates isn't exactly surprised to hear Riley say to go ahead and get it started down there. However, Riley is quite surprised two days later to receive a registered letter from the office of the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Alabama, requesting the courtesy of his and his lawyer's company in that office ten days hence. He is under investigation for criminal violation of the civil rights of one Willa Sue Jenkins, transgressing the Mann Act, and income tax evasion. And Riley is even further surprised the very next day to receive a registered letter from the Attorney General of Florida, requesting a similar personal appearance in Tallahassee. He is under investigation for rape and kidnapping of one Willa Sue Jenkins under the criminal laws of the State of Florida. Riley knows this is not the handiwork of Sam Yates or his clients, because not enough time

has passed for that to happen.

Besides the vast difference in how they taste, there is an even vaster difference between pompano and jack crevalle. The former feed mostly on sand fleas and otherwise mind their own business. The latter are voracious predators that mind everyone's business and eat anything they can get into their mouths, including pompano. Riley sighs, then laughs. *Love your enemies as yourself.*

Willa Sue doesn't see anything funny about it. She's ready to take them on with every last red cent she owns, and even with her bare hands, feet, knees, head and teeth. For the first time, Riley is sort of looking forward to seeing Willa Sue explode.

Rock and Roll

The next morning finds Ronnie Davis with two new clients sitting in one of the law firm's small conference rooms. Riley has offered to deed his home and the land it is on to the law firm, as a retainer on the attorney fee the firm will earn representing the new clients for quite a while perhaps. The house and gym are worth about \$500,000 and the land about twice that amount. Maybe three times if it is subdivided and lots are sold off. A secretary-at-law is typing up a deed off the legal description in the deed to Mary Lou and Riley, which matches the legal description in the title insurance policy the secretary-at-law also has before her. Tacitly understood, what fees the firm doesn't earn will be returned to the client someday.

Lawyers have a thing about getting paid up front in criminal cases, because they don't usually get paid otherwise. Either the client has run through his money by the time the case ends, the client is in jail, or the client has fled for parts unknown. More to the point, the client is unhappy about being caught in the first place and doesn't like paying a lawyer to do something about it in the second place. So the client would just as soon stiff the lawyer and make a clean get away to boot. And if the client is convicted and sent up the river, as is said in some circles, the client will blame the lawyer for bad representation and not want to pay the lawyer for that reason as well.

This very client attitude is what caused Riley to develop early in his law career a spiel that he came to use on every criminal client to get paid up front. Most likely the client is guilty and is, therefore, a criminal and, therefore, is scheming to commit the worst crime a lawyer can experience: not get paid by the client. So Riley said to criminal clients who resisted paying up front, "You know, I'm just like everybody else. I can only think about one thing at a time." After giving the client a chance to acknowledge this truism, Riley continued, "Meaning, as long as I'm worried about getting paid by you, I can't worry about this problem you want me to fix for you." It usually worked.

But if it didn't work, Riley usually declined the case because he probably wouldn't get paid. And when he found out he wasn't going to get paid, he would get mad and would want out of the case. But he couldn't then get out of the case because the judge wouldn't let him out. The judge would say Riley was abandoning his client and that he shouldn't have taken the case in the first case.

Lastly, if a client didn't pay up front and then got into debt with other creditors and then paid the fee, the fee could be chased and retrieved by the clients' other creditors in Bankruptcy Court. Each

creditor then got a pro rata share of the recovery after payment of Bankruptcy attorney fees and court costs. But if the fee was paid up front before the client owed the lawyer any money, the payment was for services to be rendered and was not a preferential payment to a creditor and was not subject to recapture in Bankruptcy Court.

For all of the above reasons, Riley developed three inviolate rules about getting paid up front in criminal cases, which rules he made every new lawyer coming into the firm swear a blood oath to observe unless otherwise instructed by Riley or Ronnie. Sometimes the firm took criminal cases for reasons other than money. Maybe the client was a cop or another lawyer or even a judge, and professional courtesy was given. Maybe the client was destitute but needed representation. Maybe the firm felt the case would serve the public interest. Maybe the case had notoriety and the firm's public exposure alone made the case worth handling. But these were rare exceptions to Riley's otherwise inviolate rules:

Rule 1: No client will pay you if you don't get paid up front.

Rule 2: Rule #1 is immutable.

Rule 3: Never forget rules #1 and #2.

Yes, Riley could ask the firm to do the case for free under several of the exceptions, and the firm probably would do it. But then what would he do about his home and land holdings that would be exposed to money claims made by Willa Sue's family or by prosecutors? This way the firm gets the home and land holdings away from the bad guys and pays itself and never resents having Riley as a mooching client, and Riley eventually gets back what the firm doesn't earn.

The best that Willa Sue's family and prosecutors could hope to do is to say the fee was too high and is part of an illegal scheme to defraud creditors or criminal money sanctions and some of the fee should be remitted or the firm will be sued or indicted. Judges, being lawyers once, tend to side with the law firm in such cases. Especially in high-profile criminal cases, where the potential work the law firm will do for the client and the out-of-pocket expenses of litigation could be substantial.

The secretary-at-law is also typing up an assignment of Willa Sue's future lottery winnings to the Alabama Sheriff's Boys Ranch, which for several decades has taken in wayward, troubled or abused boys and rehabilitated them in a dormitory farm-work environment, under the tutelage of men who have dedicated their lives to this kind of work. Some of these men are graduates of this benevolent program, others not. The Boys Ranch is a charitable organization and this whopping donation wipes out any income tax liabilities Riley or Willa Sue now have, have had in the past, and will have for quite a while to come. And the gift is not income taxable to the Boys Ranch.

The gift also pretty much knocks out Sam Yates and his clients, to whom a photocopy of the duly executed and notarized assignment will be sent in the afternoon mail. It will not endear Lawyer Yates and his clients to law enforcement officers in Gulf County, Florida, to try to take money from such a worthy cause. And, in any event, the worthy cause will fight like the dickens to keep the money from going to Gulf County, Florida. Quite a few deputy sheriffs know Riley Strange, have run cases to his firm in exchange for a "referral fee," and quite a few deputies or members of their families have also been represented by Riley and his firm, all for free. They will gladly be witnesses as to both Riley's good character in the community in which he lives, and to his sanity. They will keep an eye out

for him and his missus and their home place. They will lose probate court orders telling them to fetch Willa Sue Jenkins and bring her to court or the psyche ward at University Hospital, to be examined. And they will make whoever messes with Riley and Willa Sue in a vigilante fashion very unhappy indeed.

The secretary-at-law is also printing out an email from a lawyer on the windward Caribbean island Dominica, not to be confused with the Dominican Republic further north. That morning, Riley had used Ronnie's cell phone to call a lawyer in Dominica about Riley and Mary Lou obtaining expedited Dominica citizenship and passports.

A beautiful mountainous rain-forest island lying between the French protectorates Guadalupe and Martinique, this Eden island is the home away from home of Riley's soul. It is where he and Mary Lou took their honeymoon, staying at the small Papiotte resort high up in the cool rain forest above Trafalgar township. Papiotte is up where the bats live and thus few mosquitoes. Papiotte gets nearly three hundred inches of annual rainfall. Papiotte's rooms rent for about what you would pay at a Budget Inn in Birmingham. Its restaurant's cuisine overlooking the valley down into Roseau and the Caribbean was superior to any restaurant in Birmingham, in Riley and Mary Lou's opinion. Its view was superior to heaven, they felt.

Papiotte was started by Americans who came to Dominica and fell in love with it and became Dominican citizens. After Hurricane David knocked Papiotte down flat, the owners rebuilt it better than before. They are among a small minority of white Dominican citizens, mostly English stock. Most Dominicans are of mixed descent: Anglo-Saxon, African slaves, and Carib Indians who held the island when Columbus sighted it as the first land on his second journey to the New World. It being Sunday, the navigator named the island Dominica, the Lord's Day. Yet it wasn't until the late seventeenth hundreds that the British finally defeated the fierce Caribs on this rugged mountain jungle fortress, after the Caribs had repeatedly repelled Spanish, French and British invasions. It is believed that the Caribs had paddled and sailed up from South America and had overrun and decimated the more gentle Arawaks in colonizing most of the Caribbean. Now all left of the Carib nation is a small reservation of mix-breeds living above the rugged rocky Atlantic middle coast side of the island.

That's the side on which Riley and Mary Lou stayed during their second visit, in quaint Olive's Guest House. Olive Windham's ancestors were African, Carib and English, but her skin showed little of her English ancestry, while her speech gave away her fine British education. Oddly, she was Catholic on a mostly Anglican Church island, a tribute to the French settlers who had started a few plantations on Dominica even though France itself was denied conquest. Dominica's *patois* (creole) is filled with French influence.

Riley mercilessly teased Olive about being a cannibal, like her Carib ancestors were reported to have been. The mystery meat in her stews was Dominicans she didn't like onto whom she had had one of her obeah friends cast spells. It freaked Olive out to be told she even had obeah friends. Obeah is magic. A cousin of voodoo, both sects' roots lie in Africa.

During that trip Mary Lou met two obeah over in Grand Bay on the south Atlantic coast of the island, where the main Rastafarian population also hangs out. She cast a spell upon them a spell of her own, which kept the obeah from casting spells on Christians or Catholics, but not on other people. The spell also kept Christians and Catholics from casting spells on Obeahs and other people. What's good for one side is good for both sides. While they were departing from the airport at Roseau, an official

asked Mary Lou how she had liked his country. She said she loved it. She later told Riley on the Liat Otter taking them back to San Juan, Puerto Rico, that when she said she loved Dominica something BIG AND WONDERFUL embraced her. It was like being in the space but more powerful. Brought tears to her eyes. It was the spirit of the island, telling her thank you and to come back. She never made it back.

A dirt-poor country with a per capital annual income of \$600, Dominica's main hard currency revenue was banana exports under an exclusive license to its former master Great Britain. But that protective franchise crumbled under U.S. Government "free-trade" pressure mounted against Britain to open its home markets to somewhat cheaper mass-produced bananas grown by the American-owned Dole Company on its plantations in Central America.

Ergo, with the looming loss of its primary hard currency market coinciding with the fall of communism in the Soviet Union and the opening of travel and emigration by its citizens, and with the comparable miseries in South Africa, and with mainland Chinese seeking lives out from under the cloud of communism there, and with many other nations not suiting some of their citizens, Dominica became a seller of passports.

This money-raising practice initially disturbed Riley and Mary Lou, because they feared the door was opening for the Garden Island of the Caribbean to be overrun by ruffians and riffraff. But their fears proved unfounded. All the ruffians and riffraff wanted was simply to have Dominican passports to travel the world, which their current passports might now allow. They also wanted to have a place to cache their assets where their nations of origin couldn't get at those assets. Dominica protects her citizens and their assets a wee bit more jealously than she protects visitors and their assets. Dominica especially protects her citizens from the United States, after what it did about the bananas knowing full well how important to poor Dominican farmers was the banana export to Britain.

Some thanks, after their President Eugenia Charles stood beside Ronald Reagan on national television, and told American viewers that she believed Fidel Castro and Russians were taking over the island nation of Grenada down at the lower end of the Windward Islands. If Grenada fell, many island nations would then fall like dominoes, if American didn't intervene. In exchange for Dominican support, President Reagan later had satellite disks installed for free in Dominica, so Dominicans could watch American television and learn about their benefactor.

Dominicans suddenly wanted the things Americans all seemed to have, judging by the American television commercials. As there was no way for this to happen on a third-world farming island, and with the urge to have American baubles now overwhelming, many heretofore salt-of-the-earth Dominicans turned to trafficking in drugs, especially cocaine, to get rich quick. Most of them became addicts. Other Dominicans emigrated northward, collecting in the American and British Virgin Islands to earn American dollars, even on British protectorate of Tortola, where the dollar is the national currency. Dominica lost nearly a whole generation of its citizens because it stood beside Ronald Reagan, the ugly, stupid, bad American who saved Dominica from communism.

The Dominican lawyer, Harvey Wilson, later became wealthy by arranging the issuance of Dominican passports to foreign nationals. When they spoke earlier today, Wilson told Riley that for \$100,000 dollars U.S. (\$240,000 Eastern Caribbean dollars), he could get Dominican citizenship approved and passports issued in a month's time. He would take \$20,000 U.S. as his fee, a couple of government officials would take another \$20,000 between them, and the country would get the rest of

it. But Riley and Willa Sue must come to Dominica now to meet these two officials, to be interviewed and judged worthy of becoming citizens. A substantial deposit, say \$100,000 U.S. in a Dominica bank, followed by a purchase of a certificate of deposit in that amount issued by that bank would be considered evidence of worthiness.

No, if Riley and Willa Sue are not convicted felons, the potential legal proceedings looming ahead of Riley will not make any difference. Innocent until proven guilty in Dominica, just like in the U.S. No, extradition is not likely if Riley is convicted under such amusing U.S. circumstances. Dominicans have a wry sense of justice from living so many years in servitude and impoverishment to their former white masters, and they welcome those who have somehow managed to beat that system at its own game. Especially those who wish to share their winnings with Dominica and its people.

Most especially *Americans* like Mr. Strange, who with his first wife on their honeymoon had crashed an ocean side barbeque below Roseau and had there met Lawyer Wilson and ended up spending several hours being fed, spirited and entertained. During the festive affair, Riley shared an idea with Wilson, which had hatched after scoping out the island and its economic plight. This was before the passport bonanza was invented, when it was impossible for foreign nationals to buy land and live in Dominica without having a Dominican national as a "business partner" in some enterprise mostly funded by the foreign national.

Riley's idea was that Dominica citizens, who owned land or even houses or small lodges, would rent the property to foreign nationals for a term certain, ten, twenty, thirty years, for an one-time payment either in cash or in improvements to or construction of a place of habitation. The payment would be substantial, justifying such a long-term lease. When the foreign national was not using the property, the Dominica partner could rent it out to someone else, daily, weekly, monthly, and keep all the rent. The Dominica partner would be responsible for normal upkeep, but the foreign investor would be responsible for hurricane damage. When the term of the lease ended, the property reverted fully to the Dominica partner. This way, no foreign national ever owned a piece of Dominica but got to live there as if that was so for a good long while.

Wilson sold this idea to the government of Dominica. Dominican lawyers and accountants then spread the word to lawyers and accountants elsewhere, and the plan began to bear fruit. Twenty-four years still remains on Riley and Mary Lou's lease in Soufriere, below Roseau, where Harvey Wilson, their Dominican partner, also lives. That's where the hot sulfur springs are. Way up in the mountains above Papiotte is where the Boiling Lake is. The volcano that is Dominica is still active underground. This is why two of the mountains in the nearly mile-high volcanic range running the north-south spine of the island are named after the devil. The Lord's Day, indeed.

In gratitude to Harvey Wilson bringing this way of safely bringing in foreign capital, the Dominican government favored him when the passport boom came into play. When he now calls two government officials who profited from the long term rental project and tells them what he needs and that Riley Strange is the reason they so profited, there are big smiles all around. The \$10,000 they each will receive will insure not only expeditious issuance of Dominica citizenship and passports to Mr. Strange and his new wife—God rest Mr. Strange's dearly departed wife's soul. The lobby fees will also insure future preference in other venues of business and in any U.S. attempt to extradite Riley and his new wife.

Wilson's telephone calls parallel Ronnie's calls to the U.S. Attorney's office in Birmingham, and then to the Florida Attorney General's office in Tallahassee, to set up appointments. Even as Riley

calls Liat Airlines in Antigua and books two next-day reservations from San Juan to Antigua. That's as far as he plans to fly. The rest of the way is by boat.

Riley and Mary Lou had met Captain White at the dockside in Portsmouth on the northwest part of Dominica during their second trip. The Captain owned and operated a thirty-something foot inter-island ferry, that mostly transported passengers and fresh-picked Dominica fruits to Antigua and Tortola, and people and dry goods back to Dominica via Antigua. Once a week, Captain White had said he made this trip. Harvey Wilson had given Riley the Captain's phone number, and when Riley calls the Captain's daughter answers and says her father is presently en route to Antigua and will be back through there from Tortola two days hence. She is sure her father will have room for them, if they don't have too much to carry. It is an overnight trip back to Dominica, so bring warm clothes and waterproof outer wear, in case it rains or the seas are up and breaking over the sides. The dock he uses is on the east end of Antigua, next to the big concrete cistern the British built years ago. Any taxi driver on Antigua will know where that is. Be there by five in the afternoon. She will call by cell phone and let him know to be on the lookout for two Americans wanting passage to Dominica. Yes, cash only. No records kept of who travels.

After talking with Liat, Riley calls Delta Airlines and books two morning reservations from Birmingham to Atlanta to San Juan, arriving there in time to make the afternoon Liat flight to Antigua. He pays by credit card, ticketless vouchers to be picked up at the airports. Lastly, Riley calls the Tortola banker and gives wiring instructions to Harvey Wilson's law firm account in Dominica.

Since the Tortola bank will send the wire from its own account and will not identify the sending account's number, there is no way to identify the sending account. Since the recipient of the wire is Harvey Wilson's law firm account, there is no way to identify the ultimate recipient. It is not likely that the prosecutors will trace Riley's calls to Dominica, or the email back to Birmingham from Dominica. Email is how he and Ronnie have decided all future communications will be made, via Harvey Wilson's firm, until Ronnie is otherwise advised. Ronnie fully agrees that Riley and Willa Sue need to disappear, to increase his leverage with the powers that be. And even if the F.B.I. somehow is able to track them into Dominica, that will be like tracking them into a black hole because of the banana war.

Willa Sue has stayed in Ronnie's office because she wants to hear him talk to the prosecutors, while Riley handles the money stuff. Although it took Riley a while to persuade her that discretion is the better part of valor, Willa Sue now likes the idea of screwing Harlan and her parents and that slimy Sam Yates out of the lottery money by giving it all to the Boys Ranch. What the heck, she didn't have nothing when Riley came to the vegetable stand that day, but two bodies and a life buried in other people's books. Now she has Riley and nearly a million and a half bucks in the Tortola bank, and Riley has about three and a half million there in a joint account for them both. They also have their own books to sell. Ronnie and his firm are taken care of, and she never went nowhere before she went to Birmingham. Now she can go anywhere.

When Riley returns, Ronnie says, "I didn't tell the prosecutors you aren't coming to their party. When I get there I'll say they don't need to talk further with either of you because they have a video of *Oprah's* show. And that I won't let them talk further with you in any event. Shit, you already made their case on TV. Not much else they could use against you. And whatever the IRS has up its sleeve, the donation to the Sheriff's Boys Ranch will squash flat. Maybe I ought to video tape the meetings, then send you a copy for your amusements?" Obviously, a joke.

"By the way, with all this commotion I forgot to tell you that Oprah sent me a little personal note thanking me for sending you two her way and declining to take a piece of the action on the books. She wishes you two all the best with the books and the case. Speaking of which, what are we going to do with the publishing hounds that are now sniffing around? I got a call from a Michael Copperfield at Simon & Shuster, and another one from, can't recall the caller's name now, but his firm is HarperSanFrancisco. They both said they want to buy the two books sight unseen. They will pay a fifty-thousand-dollar kill fee for each book, and if they like the books after reading the manuscripts, they will pay onemillion-dollar advances on each book. Must be a standard package for hot authors, or they are talking to each other and working us together. I figure they'll double their offers all the way around."

"I agree," Riley says, "What do you think about offering them the books in partnership? Let them pool their resources. Got a feeling they'll have a hard time keeping books in the stores when the public knows the books are available. One firm might not be big enough to handle production and distribution. Or one might go south on us and the other doesn't. Two firms is insurance, don't you think?"

Ronnie nods. "Still always two jumps ahead of everyone else, I'm glad to see. If you're crazy, then foxes are the dumbest creatures on earth."

Riley smiles at his life-long friend, says, "Get your secretary-at-law to draw up general powers of attorney with you as our attorney-in-fact, for us both to sign after you take us out for a bon voyage lunch. With that authority, you can deal with the publishers and anybody else we need to transact business with but won't be here to do it. And if we do need to sign things, you can email them to Lawyer Wilson, or to wherever else we are. We might be going walkabout, mate."

"Take me with you!" Ronnie wails.

"Can't do that, amigo. Got a beautiful bunkmate already, and you're ugly and have the wrong kind of plumbing. But you can come visiting, as long as you sail in and don't give us away. You'd like Lawyer Wilson. And Dominica.

"God, the food there. Grows more than the whole Caribbean could eat, and so much goes to rot. Oranges, grapefruits, limes, lemons, bananas, papayas, mangoes, star fruit, passion fruit, coconut, all sorts of weird yam-like things, and all the regular vegetables we have here. Except they are grown in volcanic soil that's so rich that when you eat the food you wonder what in the hell you've been eating in the States. Store-bought food here tastes like cardboard compared to food there. And the fishing's great year round and the catch ain't shipped in from somewhere else. Just go to the outdoor market in Roseau and get yourself a half a dolphin, or a whole snapper or grouper, or parrot fish or lobsters."

"Riley, stop hurting me!" Ronnie throws up his hands in surrender.

Willa Sue is beginning to think she just might like the tropics. Can always go up on the mountains or jump in the ocean to cool off. And with Dominica claiming over one hundred rivers all over everywhere, there's that too. Maybe some of those rivers don't require bathing suits. Riley said there are a couple of bays there where you can put on a mask and look down in the water and see a million fish of all sorts of colors, and he knows where the pretty beaches and places are that tourists never go. But the first thing he plans to do there is look up the two obeahs and get them to make a spell, to keep the prosecutors away and to keep him and Willa Sue away from the prosecutors.

After lunch, Riley and Willa execute the powers of attorney and mail the assignment of the lottery rights to the Alabama Sheriff Boys Ranch. Then they head for home and pack. All they really need to carry are money and their passports. However, for convenience they pack a piece of luggage each, with toiletries, underwear and socks, light shirts, shorts, slacks, sandals, walking shoes, a sweater and Gortex rain jackets and pants, and their karate gis (uniforms). Riley's laptop and a box of disks, some empty, others containing files, including the two books, he decides to also take along, just in case. Anything else they need they can get where they were going. Ronnie will have the Salvation Army come out and pick up the rest.

That evening, feeling pretty smug about it all, they drive in to Casa del Sol for a bon voyage dinner and cervazas, then go home, make love, and conk out expecting to dream of tinkle bells and such.

ACT III

The Gods Must Be Crazy

Up Jumped the Devil

Would you believe?!!!! Just after the literary god figures out a way for the hero and his replicated heroine to get off scot-free, leaving the bad guys cussin' and spittin' and saving the literary god and his ardent readers, as well, from facing the bad guys' music, the hero and heroine have the unmitigated nerve to have defining dreams that prove being a god isn't all it's cracked up to be.

Riley dreams that he and Ronnie are playing stud poker with three F.B.I. agents. Riley has played some serious poker in his life: card poker, lawsuit poker, karate poker, fishing poker, love poker, but this is the first dream poker he has played.

Riley's down card is the Queen of diamonds. When the first-card bets are made, he calls Ronnie's ten-dollar chip. The three agents also call.

Riley's first up card is the Ace of diamonds. Now high hand showing, he bets twenty dollars and the others all call.

Rileys' next up card is the Ten of diamonds. Possible flush. But one of the agents now has two eights showing and doubles the bet. Riley and Ronnie, who now has a King and Jack showing, call. An agent with an ace now showing also calls. The other agent folds.

Riley's next card is the Jack of diamonds. The agent with the pair of eights doubles the bet again. Riley calls. Ronnie and the other agent fold.

Riley's last card up is the King of diamonds. A royal straight flush. The highest possible hand.

The agent's last card up is a deuce, giving him two pair showing. Two pair loses if Riley has another diamond in the hole making a flush. Or a queen making a straight. The agent says he doubts Riley has the diamond Queen in the hole. Too unlikely. The agent has a deuce in the hole. Full house beats a flush or a straight.

The agent doubles the bet again. Out of chips, they are now using markers. Riley calls and raises by that much again. The agent pauses, then calls and raises. Riley calls and raises. The agent says he calls Riley's bet.

Without looking down Riley turns up his hole card, proud as can be.

The agent laughs, turns up the deuce: a full house. As he leans forward to rake in the huge pot, Riley reaches out and puts his hands on top of the agent's hands, to stop him.

"Look at your hole card, Riley," Ronnie cautions.

Riley looks down and to his utter shock it is the Queen of *hearts*. Riley only has a straight. When he looks up at the agent, the man's countenance is now that of the devil. Stephen King never saw anything *this* ugly or which feels *so* bad to Riley, who physically recoils and tries to get up and leave the table, but can't move out of the grip of something so awful he can't begin to find words to describe it.

The devil laughs hideously.

Riley looks pleadingly to Ronnie, who says, "Maybe poker isn't such a good idea, amigo."

At another poker table, dressed in her white karate gi, Willa Sue stands facing her mother, father and Harlan. Her belt sash is black. Her family's countenance is grim. What to do? Kick their heads in? Break their arms and legs one at a time? As she contemplates her attack, a black rabbit hops out of a shrub between them and stops still. It turns to face Willa Sue. It speaks. "If you love Riley as much as I do, will you go along with what he now feels he must do? And if you love me for bringing him to you, will you not harm your family and will let me show you how to deal with them?" Tears come to Willa Sue's eyes even as her beloved's mighty struggle awakens her. She knows the rabbit is Mary Lou and that Riley is not going to make her day when he tells her what's going on with him.

She doesn't fight it when Riley says they can't go to Dominica just yet, but must stay and face the music. When she tells him her dream, he weeps. She weeps when he says he doesn't feel right about trying to revoke the assignment of the lottery proceeds to the Boys Ranch. No matter what else happens, it's a good way to deal with her family and their lawyer. And the IRS. And any greedy somebody else who wants to punish Riley, like the prosecutors and whoever is pulling their strings.

From within their weeping, they go fully into the space. Not the same as it had been between Riley and Mary Lou, but equivalent. Riley twitches. Then he jerks. Then he lurches. His whole body goes into spasm. Never before has he had such a response to being with Willa Sue. Nor has she seen such a response and she isn't sure what to make of it. Then she sees what to make of it. It is poking up under the sheet. She makes something of it. Then she makes a lot of it. Then there is this big explosion and a lot of screaming. Riley releases fully into her. Finally she understands what he was not having happen with her. Finally she knows: he loves her truly. And she knows this would not be happening if they had not agreed on waiting to go to Dominica, or if she had tried to get back the lottery money from

the Boys Ranch.

"But for your dreams, I would say you are crazy for doing this," Ronnie says later that morning in his office. "But I still don't think Riley should go with me to the meetings with the prosecutors."

"I respectfully disagree, Lawyer," Riley says. "I don't have anything to hide, being on *Oprah* proved that. I just didn't want to have to deal with it. Now I'm going to have to deal with it and I'm going to need your help. I suspect something bigger than the prosecutors' egos is pushing them. Something we cannot yet see. We have always given generously to political candidates sympathetic to the plaintiff bar, because they see us as one of the few true checks on a corporate and religious takeover of America. But for lawyers like us and the threat of whopping jury verdicts we make happen, little people in America would be at the mercy of defective products, incompetent doctors the medical profession won't discipline, bad cops the blue line defends, flim flam artists like Jimmy Baaker and Jimmy Swaggart, and so forth. Yeah, I bent the ends with Willa Sue to justify the means, but nobody got hurt and she got helped and so did I. This case isn't about justice, Ronnie, it's about something bigger. A lot bigger. And I'm going to see it through. I have to."

Ronnie is a couple inches taller than Riley, a few inches wider. Not fat wider. Muscle. He played football at Auburn. Weak-side linebacker. Second team all-American. Still plays handball at the YMCA most days. Still hard and quick like a cat on the courts. He spent years developing the ability to hit front-wall kill shots with his off-hand, so that now when shots go left he doesn't try to run around the ball and return the shot righthanded. But these left-side shots Riley and Willa Sue are now serving up are just a bit beyond anything Ronnie ever encountered in handball, or in his law career. The dazed look on his ruggedly handsome face tells Riley to do some more explaining.

"You don't know what it was like in the dream. Shit, Ronnie, the son of a bitch was inside of me and all over me. You know, I often heard from other kids that getting hit in the balls would hurt more than I could ever imagine. Then one day I misjudged a ground ball at recess and it hit me right in the nuts. Down I went before everyone. You were there, you saw it. Wasn't anything else I could do. God, did it hurt! And seemed it would never stop hurting. But finally it let up some and I was able to get up and waddle over to a bench and sit. No more baseball that day. And no more misjudging ground balls either. Once was a gracious plenty.

"The point is, amigo, what I got hit with in the dream was a hell of a lot worse than getting hit with a baseball in the nuts. It didn't just hurt either: it was terrifying. I never knew such hate could exist. But it does. And the heart Queen showed me the way through it, as did Willa Sue's dream. We're going to hold hands and love each other and, to the best of our abilities, everyone else, as we walk through hellfire together and out the other side."

Ronnie doesn't know what to say except, "Well, why don't we all sleep on it and talk again tomorrow."

Feeling that is a waste of time, Willa Sue says, "I want to take a polygraph test as soon as possible. Then I want you to send the results to my family's lawyer, and I want you to take a copy of it to the prosecutors so they will see that I told the truth about what they did to me and that Riley was used to save me from it. Yeah, he started out being selfish but in the end he wasn't selfish. I could have left him and taken all the money and he would have let me go, but I chose to stay because I love him.

He's my mate. And I want to be there with you and Riley when you meet with the prosecutors. I want them to see me, hear me. I want them to know that they are not going to get any help from me and that I'm going to tell the world that Riley saved me from hell and if God wanted him to do that in the way he did it, then who is stupid enough to second-guess God?"

Willa Sue wonders where in the hell *those* words came from? Then she sees the black rabbit in her mind's eye, looking straight at her. She knows who just spoke. But she keeps that to herself. She doesn't think Ronnie will believe her, if she says she's hearing from a spirit. She will tell Riley about it later.

"That's an interesting line of defense," Ronnie says in wonderment. "Means I'll have to strike juries of religious nuts, something I have always tried keep off juries because they tend to be stingy with damage awards and harsh with convictions. Religious fanatics don't like gambling or taking the law into your own hands, or talking about sex in public and saying it was all God's doing. But what do I know? Maybe a jury will love hearing that argument. One thing I *am* in agreement with is that we need to get the polygraph done. That's where we need to start, for a lot of reasons. We'll let the world know the results."

He stops, has a thought, says, "You will pass the polygraph, won't you?"

Willa Sue nods. Her look leaves no doubt.

"What about Lawyer Wilson down in Dominica, Riley?" Ronnie asks. "He has \$200,000 of your money."

"I think I'll give him a little of it as a fee and ask him to give the rest of it to some poor folks I know on the island who sure can use help. To tell the truth, I like Dominica better than I like the U.S. Maybe before this is over I'll give more money to Lawyer Wilson to hand out to worthy situations. I think Mary Lou would have liked that. Shit. It just dawned on me. Maybe that's where she wanted the lottery money to go in the first place? Well, too late to do anything about that. Where it went is as good a place. A lot more messed up boys will get help now with the extra money the Boys Ranch will have to spend. I imagine that a lot of those boys were messed with just like Willa Sue was messed with."

On the way home Riley and Willa Sue talk about the two books. The publicity surrounding these latest developments can only enhance his book, especially if he adds a chapter entitled something like "Fool for a Client." "The Legal High Road" might also be a good title. Or maybe there will be two new chapters. Yes, a chapter about a lawyer who gets himself on the edge of the law by trying to heal himself by healing someone else. Then a sequel chapter about how the lawyer is compelled by a riveting dream to eschew making a clean getaway and, instead, takes a road seldom, if ever, traveled in the legal arena.

This intriguing theme also can be woven into his and Willa Sue's book. Or perhaps there will be a sequel book altogether: *Only Fools Rush In, Again*. All of this Riley will write up in an update memo to Ronnie, so Ronnie can add the memo to the manuscripts before sending them off to the two publishers. And to Oprah.

Shark Attack

Ronnie called Tallahassee and persuaded the Assistant Attorney General assigned to Riley's case to attend the meeting at the U.S. Attorney's office in Birmingham. If there is going to be twin prosecution, it is best, Ronnie said, that the prosecutors coordinate their cases so there will be no overlapping, thus no double jeopardy issues. Also, Riley is an Alabama citizen and that could put Florida to a lengthy extradition process since Florida has no law enforcement jurisdiction in Alabama. And to make it palatable to come to Birmingham, Ronnie's client will reimburse the State of Florida for its costs. The meeting was delayed three weeks, however, to iron out conflicts in everyone's schedules.

The three groups are now meeting in the U.S. Attorney's offices in the Hugo Black Federal Building in downtown Birmingham. A North Alabama native, Black became an icon on the U.S. Supreme Court. Reputed to be a former member of the KKK, he also became a thorn in the side of conservative southerners, siding with the cause of desegregation during the Civil Rights Movement spawned by *Brown vs. Board of Education* arising out of Little Rock, Arkansas.

From that day forward, it slowly dawned in Dixie that the Confederacy had truly lost the War Between the States, as the Civil War is called in the South even to this day. Even as Abraham Lincoln is still cursed by many religious southerners to this day. They curse him not for ending slavery but for being a heathen because he never went to church and poked fun at people who did. It is said that when Lincoln was asked by Republican political big wigs who came to size him up as their political race horse, whether or not he attended church, Lincoln said he did not but he would if he could find one where God was in charge. He also said when he was President that when God wanted him to do something or not do something, God figured out a way to let him know what God wanted. Hugo Black was in the cut of Abraham Lincoln.

The Assistant Attorney General for the State of Florida, Marion Compton, is not of that cut. Nor is the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Alabama, Winston Black. Nor is the senior F.B.I. agent in attendance, James Denty. Nor is the District Director of the Internal Revenue Service also in attendance, William Finley. They are government employees who never once dreamed of stepping on the political shoes of their masters or into the greatness shoes of Lawyers Lincoln and Black. Moreover, they are still a bit rattled to have Willa Sue Jenkins present, the dazzling beauty that she is. They are also a tad frayed over being video taped. That they were not expecting, but Ronnie Davis said it was part of his pre-trial discovery.

After stating their positions about Riley having violated various laws passed to protect the public, the prosecutors are now being treated to a dog and pony show the likes of which usually only occurs in a book but it ought to occur in real life more times than it does. The performance begins with Ronnie asking one Jason Manning to summarize his professional qualifications.

Manning wears a grey cotton suit and white shirt and black tie. A little overweight, he looks to be about fifty years old. "My name is Jason Manning. I am a certified polygraph examiner. I do this full time and have done it for eighteen years. My clients include the F.B.I. in the Northern District of Alabama, various state law enforcement offices throughout the state, and private lawyers. I also do examinations for various local governments and private corporations, to screen new employees and to determine whether or not current employees are stealing, using illegal drugs or otherwise misbehaving."

Ronnie thanks Manning, then asks him to summarize his examination of Willa Sue Jenkins, now seated beside Ronnie.

"In my opinion, Willa Sue Jenkins was either sexually molested by her brother Harlan or she completely believes that she was so molested. She also believes that what happened between her and Mr. Strange was an act of Divine Providence and that the laws you purport to enforce to protect the general public have no application in this case. I was unable to shake her on either of these points. Or on any other point. For example, she said that she has substantial assets off-shore, lottery winnings assigned to her by Mr. Strange. But she would say nothing further about that. She said she was not avoiding income taxes, nor did she intend to avoid them except by legal means. She said she had given most of the lottery proceeds away to charity, the Alabama Sheriff's Boys Ranch. All these answers read as true."

"*All* the proceeds?" the District Director asks.

"That's what she said during the examination," Manning replies.

"That's correct, Mr. Denty," Ronnie says. "Here is a copy of the executed assignment. It was mailed to the Boys Ranch the same date it was executed, and I understand that one monthly installment has now been received there from SouthTrust Bank, the lottery administrator. More on that in a bit, but first I want Mr. Manning to summarize the polygraph he also administered to Mr. Strange."

Manning continues. "My examination of Mr. Strange revealed no evidence of intentional untruthfulness. Mr. Strange said he tricked Willa Sue Jenkins into coming to Birmingham where he planned to lock her in his gymnasium for up to a year, but he had no intention of having sex with her against her wishes, or even with her wishes. He found her most unattractive and could not imagine ever having sexual congress with her as long as he felt that way about her. He said he had no intention of putting her into prostitution or other forms of debauchery. He said he intended to release her at the end of one year, and if she lost the weight, to give her the lottery proceeds. If not, he said he would have given them to her anyway, just for putting up with him. He admitted he had transferred the lottery assets he had received to an offshore bank and that he had transferred a large sum of his own off shore as well. But he did not say where that was and would not answer questions about that. He said he has not avoided income taxes nor has he planned to avoid them other than by legal means, such as making a substantial charitable deduction to the Alabama Sheriff's boys ranch via a joint gift with his wife, then owner of said moneys."

Ronnie now completes with Denty. "That wipes out any tax obligation in this tax year, and the carry back and carry forward ought to let my clients live tax free for many years, don't you agree?" Denty is hardpressed to even make a response.

Ronnie looks back at Manning, says, "Please also speak to Mr. Strange's plan to flee the United States."

"Well, he said during the polygraph examination that he once did have such a plan and it looked fool-proof and delicious. Then he said he had a dream on the eve of departure that told him it was a bad plan in God's eyes, and so he decided not to go with it but to stay here and, as he said it, face the music instead."

"Mr. Manning, in your professional opinion, do you believe Mr. Strange lied to you at any

time during your examination of him?"

"Not on anything substantive. Only on the questions I used to cause a lie response on the polygraph, so I would know what a lie response looked like for Mr. Strange."

"For example, sir."

"Oh, 'Is your name Riley White?' He was told to answer yes. The answer was untrue and registered as untrue. That sort of thing."

"Thank you, Mr. Manning,"

Turning to the others across the table, Ronnie now says, "As I see it, gentlemen, there is no income tax evasion case, there is no Mann Act violation, and there is no Civil Right's violation because the alleged victim, Willa Sue Jenkins, does not wish to prosecute. Nor does she feel her civil rights were violated. To the contrary, she feels her civil rights were tremendously enhanced by Riley Strange: dollar-wise, mental health-wise, love-wise and God-wise. She will so testify at any Grand Jury proceeding or criminal trial flowing from Mr. Strange being indicted. If Mr. Strange is acquitted in any such trial, then Willa Sue will, as his wife, ask your respective disciplinary agencies to sanction you for bringing a case against her wishes in her behalf for the so-called common good. And if I have any sway over her, she will sue the living shit out of each of you!"

The Assistant Attorney General for the State of Florida, Marion Compton, has not so far heard any mention of his state's interest in this matter, nor has he yet been threatened. Nor will he be. He doesn't know that yet. What he knows is that Ronnie Davis is one tough defense lawyer. What he doesn't yet know is just how tough. He is about to find out.

Turning now to Compton, who looks to be perhaps in his late thirties, Ronnie smiles, says, "We concede the kidnapping case. We have no defense to it. It's on the *Oprah* video. It's in the polygraph. However, we propose that the victim has absolved the perpetrator. Certainly she will not prosecute him. If you prosecute, you will be smeared in the media. Oprah has given us her word on that score. As have several other media journalists we have spoken with at Oprah's introduction."

Ronnie stops, looks at Compton who is now hunched down writing on a legal pad. Compton looks up because of the silence.

Ronnie continues. "As for the rape case. We will file suit papers in Florida in the near future to get the issue of Willa Sue Jenkins' mental competency straightened out. We will ask that her brother be psychiatrically examined. We will invite him to submit to a polygraph administered by the examiner of his choice, if that person is approved by local law enforcement. We have already had Willa Sue independently examined here in Birmingham by two different psychiatrists. She talked with them at length and was given a battery of tests. They say it is their opinion that she either is telling the truth about her brother raping her, or she believes he raped her. They also say she is presently competent.

"As to back then, they say that if she was sexually abused by her brother, then that certainly created all sorts of mental health issues for her, but they also say the standard course of treatment is not institutionalization but is psychotherapy and medication if that is also called for. They say they find no evidence that she was ever dangerous to herself or to anyone else before she was institutionalized. They say, based on her reporting of what happened, there was no cause to have her institutionalized. Here are

copies of these two doctors' reports. Willa Sue is also willing to be examined by any psychiatrist in good standing that the State of Florida or her family might select to examine her. But the cost of that examining will be borne by the State of Florida or by her family."

Comptom is writing again. Ronnie waits until he is done with that, then continues. "Mr. Comptom, you know that such a case will put her brother through the fires of hell, and her parents, and their lawyer, and even the judge who put her away. We will put her polygraph everywhere in Florida. We will have her on every TV and radio talk show in Florida. That will sell millions of her and Riley's book, which now is being revised to include what has subsequently transpired after they were on Oprah. Two major publishers have taken the book in joint venture. They are paying a two-million-dollar advance and have agreed to spend that much again in fast-tracking the book into production and pre-distribution marketing. The entire advance and all subsequent royalties have already assigned by my clients to the National Center for the Prevention of Child Abuse. That's also a tax-exempt organization. My clients will receive nothing from that book but the publicity. You and the people who are giving you your orders will be painted as working for the devil by the most popular woman in America. That's not going to go down well in the Bush homes, is it?"

Comptom looks surprised.

"Surely, Mr. Comptom, you don't think this is your Attorney General's bright idea?"

"I am not at liberty to answer that question, Mr. Davis," Comptom wisely says. But he is all of a sudden wondering what is really going on here.

Ronnie looks at the others in the room. "The same goes for all of you. This is a political and religious inquisition. You men have a lot more important things to be doing and you now know that. Why don't you leave us alone now with Mr. Comptom. The video will remain on. Copies of this meeting will be made for all in attendance and delivered. In the meantime, there's no need to do anything rash. Like try to get Mr. Strange put in jail because he might try to run away. He already considered fleeing and decided against that, as your own polygraph expert told you earlier. My client isn't going anywhere."

The Feds look at each other. Given Riley's reputation in the legal community and the polygraph, they would look stupid asking a federal judge to restrain him as a flight risk. And if what they have before them is shown to a federal judge, they might get their asses chewed out for trying it. What they have before them gives them about zero chance of even getting an indictment. Although they are not a cut off Lawyers Black or Lincoln, they are not idiots either. Otherwise, they would not enjoy the important posts they now hold. They are going to be glad to recommend no prosecution. And while they would love to see the political powers that be ignore that recommendation and attempt prosecution and get smeared over it, they do not for a minute doubt that Ronnie Davis is just itching to sue the living shit out of each of them if they prosecute and fail to get a conviction. They rise in unison and leave Comptom with the great white shark and his clients.

The great white waits until they are gone. "So, Mr. Comptom, we give you the kidnapping charge and ask for a slap on the wrist. You look good by getting an indictment and conviction. We get off easy with an apology—Mr. Strange was suffering from having tragically lost his wife. He is no true criminal. He gets probation. What do you say to that?"

Comptom looks up at the florescent light overhead. He has no authority to make a deal. Nor

would he presume to make one even if he had the authority, now that he knows this is coming from the governor's office. Has to be coming from there. Who else would be so eager to make a mountain out of this molehill?

"I'll have to get back to you on this, Mr. Davis. It's not my call to make."

"But if the case is prosecuted, you will handle the prosecution?"

"No, it will be handled in Gulf County where the abduction took place. The local district attorney will try the case. I will be there to help out, liaison with the Attorney General's office. Co-counsel at most."

"It will make you famous if it happens, Lawyer."

Comptom is not interested in that kind of fame, and it shows on his face.

"And by the time the case is over, you will be facing a serious complication."

"What would that be, Mr. Davis?"

"Why, the district attorney prosecuting Willa Sue's brother for rape. Surely, if you prosecute Mr. Strange for kidnapping her, you will also prosecute her brother for raping her and her family for covering it up? We'll be asking the Gulf County District Attorney to do just that if you try to get more out of us than we have offered you here today. And while I certainly don't expect the D.A. to act on that request anytime soon, by the time this is over I imagine he will have no choice but to act upon it."

"You see, don't you, that outside her family and their lawyer and the judge who put Willa Sue away, everybody else in Gulf County already thinks she hung the moon. And if he's not real careful, Jeb Bush might just end up wishing he never heard of Willa Sue Jenkins, just like his brother in the Oval Office might end up wishing that if the Feds come after Mr. Strange. Shoot, this might even end up getting Willa Sue elected as the first woman President. Not a *Republican* woman President. And Oprah as her running mate. Now wouldn't that be a hoot?"

Comptom also thinks it would be a hoot but isn't about to admit it on video. Ronnie figures the video alone is worth a bundle. He doesn't figure Sam Yates or his clients will be thrilled over it, though. Or Jeb and George Bush. Riley and Willa Sue are more subdued. Although Ronnie got a little carried away with himself, mostly they are okay with how it is going. Now comes more waiting and wondering. Thank goodness they have the garden to work and the kitchen to create meals, and trails to walk and streams to fish, and noon and evening classes at Shihan's dojo, and books to read and movies to watch, and other things to do that only they can explain.

Render unto Caesar

Richard Preston, the Gulf County District Attorney, is just about to get things started against Riley Strange, when two things happen at once. One thing is Preston gets the video from Sam Yates

that came from Ronnie Davis, along with a letter saying Ronnie has authorization from Mr. Strange to accept service of legal papers arising out of Gulf County, Florida, that pertain to Willa Sue Jenkins. The other thing Preston receives is a letter from Marion Comptom saying that the Attorney General's office wants Riley Strange prosecuted for kidnapping and Harlan Jenkins investigated for rape of his sister and Harlan's parents investigated as accomplices after the fact.

The same day, Ronnie Davis also receives a letter from the Office of the Attorney General of the State of Florida.

Dear Mr. Davis,

Please be advised that the State of Florida has considered the evidence now in its possession, and your client's offer to plead guilty to kidnapping in return for probation and a suspended sentence. That offer is declined because Riley Strange, a licensed attorney with extensive experience in criminal law defense, willfully, knowingly and deceitfully abducted Willa Sue Jenkins for his own personal ends and took her to Alabama and incarcerated her there in his own personal gymnasium until she lost one hundred and twenty five pounds at his demand. Regardless of the good that obviously did Mrs. Jenkins, the crime was not erased.

Inasmuch as Mrs. Jenkins now claims that God intervened and superseded the laws of the State of Florida, I remind her that someone once said to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and to God that which is God's. Therefore, Riley Strange will be charged with kidnapping and will be tried before a jury in Gulf County, Florida, unless he is willing to agree to serve a prison sentence. Surely you would agree that, if Mr. Strange was merely a blue collar worker who won the lottery and committed this crime, he should be entitled to no less.

As for Harlan Jenkins, brother of Willa Sue Jenkins, it appears that there is evidence that he raped his sister, and also evidence that his parents were conspiratory by having Mrs. Jenkins put into a mental institution. Accordingly, I have asked the Gulf County District Attorney, Richard Preston, to initiate an investigation into these issues as well. I will keep you apprised of that investigation, since I am sure Mrs. Jenkins wishes to see that matter brought to justice, if she was indeed raped by her brother. A copy of my letter of this date to Mr. Preston is enclosed.

Lastly, I have arranged a press conference in Tallahassee next Monday at ten o'clock in the morning on the steps of the State Capitol Building, at which I will read this letter. I will also say that I have in my possession a video of you attempting to blackmail the State of Florida out of doing its legal duty to prosecute and incarcerate criminals, by threatening to launch a publicity campaign painting this state and its governor in a bad light. Out of courtesy to you as a fellow attorney, I am inviting you to attend this press conference and to say whatever you wish to say there in your and your client's behalf.

If you have any questions, please contact either Mr. Preston or me.

Yours truly,

Marion Compton, Assistant Attorney General

While George W. Bush is not happy that the U.S. Attorney and the District Director of the Internal Revenue Service have recommended no prosecution of Riley Strange, he is pleased that the State of Florida is going forward. He built his political dynasty in Texas by being tough on crime. That is the foundation of his life and political career, despite his having publicly avowed during his harrowing march to the White House that the person in history with whom he felt the most philosophically compatible was Jesus Christ, who said his kingdom is not of this world and to turn the other cheek, seven times seventy times even; and to love and forgive your enemies, for that is the true test of who stands among the Most High before God.

In the wee hours of the same day, Riley dreams that he is in court, standing accused of kidnapping Willa Sue Jenkins. The judge is his old mentor. Clarence W. Allgood was a United States District Judge in the Northern District of Alabama for many years. Before that he was a referee in Debtors Court, a division of the U.S. Bankruptcy Court. Actually, Judge Allgood piloted the first Debtor's Court program and then he wrote the law that made Debtor's Court available all over the country. Judge Allgood made his fortune by receiving a percentage of the money involved in each debtor's case that came before him. But when he wrote the national law, he made the referee's job a salaried position because he saw that a percentage arrangement could be abused.

Judge Allgood never practiced law. But he was very political. That's how he got the referee's job in the first place. And that's how he got nominated to be a District Judge. Although there was strenuous opposition to his nomination because he had gone to a non-accredited night law school and had never practiced law, his political clout with the National Democratic Party in Alabama, especially with Congressmen John Sparkman and Lister Hill, won the day. It turned out to be a wise move. Judge Allgood became a role model for the Federal Judiciary. He also became a mentor to many young men and women. One of those young men was Riley Strange.

In his teens young Clarence had liked to jump freight trains. One day returning to Birmingham, he tripped jumping off a boxcar near Avondale crossing in southeast Birmingham and fell under the train. Both legs were severed just above the knees. In the hospital he was in deep depression, wanting to die. Then into his room came a man he did not know. The man asked what was the matter? Young Clarence said he had lost his legs and wanted to die. The man chided him for being a weakling. Clarence said that was easy for someone who had not lost his legs to say. Thereupon, the man jumped from the floor onto Clarence's bed, and standing there reached down and raised his pants legs. He had two wooden legs. Clarence was transformed.

None of the other judges in the Northern District liked handling criminal cases, so Clarence agreed to take them all. Because of his experience in bankruptcy, he took all of those cases as well. Because no one else wanted to do it, he also took all Social Security Benefit Denial appeals, and all prisoner writs from federal and state prisons.

It was known throughout the Northern District that Judge Allgood was a tough but fair judge. He encouraged criminals to confess and repent their crimes. Then he would favor them with lesser sentences or sometimes with probation. Criminals who insisted on trial and got convicted got longer sentences. With only a few exceptions, any criminal who came before Judge Allgood ended up liking the man. The fan mail he received from convicts he had put away and from their families was substantial.

Most especially was Judge Allgood fond of moonshiners. Once he himself had enjoyed homebrew, but his stomach had gone to ailing and he had to give up booze altogether. But he just couldn't make himself put a moonshiner in the penitentiary for making white lightning. A big reason he couldn't make himself do that, he once told Riley in chambers, was because the Baptists in Alabama had voted most of the counties dry. Then to keep those counties dry, they conspired with the moonshiners each time a bill came up in the state legislature to vote a particular county wet, to defeat the bill. Judge said he didn't like being used to punish whiskey makers for not paying federal alcohol taxes because they would be arrested by state law enforcement officers if they did pay those taxes, thus admit they were making illegal whiskey in Alabama. The moonshiners loved Judge Allgood, and it was said that they patrolled his farm up in St. Claire County where Riley had often fished with his mentor and friend, to keep poachers off the place.

Riley was convinced Judge Allgood was really an angel and that his robes were just a disguise. Riley was also convinced before it happened that Judge Allgood was soon to leave this world. They visited once not long before it actually happened, and Judge lamented how "the idiots in the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals" were putting out sentencing guidelines that took all discretion away from the District Judges. All because some judges had gotten too harsh, others too lenient. "They are taking the humanness out of judging," Judge said that day. "But you know me, I figured out a way to get around their rules, but I'm not saying how." He smiled. Yet in the great man's eyes Riley saw the light going out.

That was the same time Judge said he was concerned over how he stood with God, since he didn't go to church, cussed and used to like whiskey. Riley laughed, said, "Clarence, when you get to heaven the angels are going to throw one hell of a welcome home party for you. All the people you have helped, all the good you have done, how could you not be in good standing with God?" That was the only time Riley ever called Judge by his first name. Lawyers do not call United States District Judges by their first name. Only God, their wives and other federal judges do that. But Riley knew then that he was being used to prepare Judge to leave, and a familiarity was perhaps in order. And perhaps that's why it didn't shock Riley, as it shocked everyone else who knew Judge, when he was found dead in his home. Suicide. His thirty-eight Smith & Wesson beside him. Shot through the mouth.

Judge's beloved wife, Marie, also sometimes called "Bully" because she sometimes bullied Clarence when they first started courting down at Auburn, had died of a stroke in his arms several years before. The Eleventh Circuit was trying to make him into a robot. His legs were giving out on him. His bones ached constantly. His stomach was getting worse. His soul was tired. He was lonely. Like an old Indian brave who knew it was time to leave the tribe and let the wild animals take him to the happy hunting ground, Judge took himself out. Riley's only regret was that he was not there when it happened, so Judge was not alone. Damn, this lawyer is crying in telling this.

Riley sometimes felt Judge around him when he couldn't figure something out. And then he got an idea and it worked when he put it to use. So in the wee hours of the morning that the letter from Marion Comptom is coming to Ronnie, Judge comes to Riley in a dream and, from the bench, says simply, "Let the judge decide the case, Riley. Don't take it to the jury."

At the same time Mary Lou is visiting Willa Sue in a dream, saying to her, "Someone who loves Riley as much as I do is with him now, telling him what to do. This someone was one of God's chosen on earth and he is passing that mantle to Riley. You need to be strong, Willa Sue, strong for yourself, strong for Riley. He loves you as I love you, but he has been called by God and that is more

important than anything else."

Of course, they don't know what this is all about when they rise in the morning, but by mid-morning in Ronnie's office they know what is coming down. Willa Sue isn't going to have to do anything about Harlan: the State of Florida is going to do it. This seems right to her. But the other, Riley being prosecuted for kidnapping the woman whose life and soul were saved by his doing that, well that just seems like the work of the devil to her. Which it is. But then, even the devil works for God, although not intentionally.

Ronnie is also distraught. Not because he faults himself, but because he knows that doing time is a terrible thing. Especially doing time in a state governed by a man whose prime directive is to be the avenging angel, despite the Bible admonition, "Vengeance is mine sayeth the Lord." In Alabama, Riley would be afforded some professional courtesy: He would get a suspended sentence and probation given all the circumstances surrounding his actions. There would be no political and religious vendetta here to maim him. And even if there was one, the Lawyer Brotherhood would protect him. But in Florida, Riley is owed no professional favors and has no political alliances he can call in. Maybe he should plead insanity. Maybe Dr. Stakely would testify that Riley was so upset over losing Mary Lou that he was not in his right mind when it came to anything that reminded him of her.

"No! We are not going to go there, Ronnie," Riley flat out rejects using the insanity defense. "In the first place, I knew exactly what I was doing and just didn't care what the consequences might be. In the second place, that line of defense puts at risk what we have done with the lottery proceeds, and it jeopardizes Willa Sue's account in Tortola, the book deals, the buy-out of my interest in the law firm, and the law firm's fee in this case. Probably left some things out, but that's a good start on why we aren't going in that direction."

Ronnie throws up his hands. Riley continues. "I had a dream this morning, as did Willa Sue."

Ronnie looks up at the ceiling. He doesn't live his life by dreams and still finds it rather weird even though Riley says that the Bible often speaks of God telling people what to do in dreams. Ronnie is Episcopalian, a member of the Vestry at St. Luke's over in Mountain Brook. Good for business. Good for socializing. As far as Ronnie knows, nobody at St. Luke's lives like Riley lives. In fact, as far as Ronnie knows, nobody else he knows lives like Riley lives. It started when Mary Lou came. Before that, Riley was "normal." After Mary Lou, Riley was strange. But Ronnie never quit loving Riley or being his friend, and he isn't quitting now.

"What were the dreams, amgio?"

The idea of not having a jury trial intrigues both lawyers. It is an accused's Constitutional right to be tried by a jury of peers. But an accused can waive jury trial and be tried only by the judge, and there is nothing a prosecutor can do about it. Often, prosecutors wish a case would be tried by the judge and not by the jury. Juries are unfathomable as often as not. Like playing roulette. Judges are more predictable. But in this case the prosecutor will prefer to be in front of a jury of God-fearing, law-abiding religious men and women, who will only be allowed by a judge to hear what Riley did to Willa Sue. The ultimate benefit to her will be kept from the jury, because it is not relevant to the commission of the crime. However, a judge will hear the whole story before imposing sentence. For the state of mind of the defendant and the actual damage to and the wishes of the victim are taken into consideration by the judge. And now that Willa Sue's brother Harlan is under investigation, the judge will know about that and perhaps will be swayed by it as well. Maybe Judge Allgood's counsel *is* the

best course of action.

Line in the Sand

Ronnie has advised Riley not to go the press conference. For all they know, Riley might be arrested, thrown into a jail and a bond of ten million dollars set, to make sure he suffers plenty waiting on his trial. That is not going to happen if Ronnie has anything to do with it. He will make arrangements with Comptom to surrender Riley at trial, on condition that Riley not be captured until the trial is over and the judge orders incarceration. From Alabama, that can be negotiated: those who have the gold make the rules. Ronnie has the gold—Riley—that the State of Florida wants. Or rather, the gold the Bushes want.

As for Marion Comptom, he feels that Ronnie spoke truly in the meeting in Birmingham when he said the law enforcers had better things to be doing. But Marion has fifteen years in the AG's office and has his sights set on the AG's position for himself some day. So he is not inclined to do anything to ruin that dream, like royally piss off the Bushes and end up getting fired and then having to practice law the old-fashioned way, like Ronnie Davis and Riley Strange learned to do it. No, Marion Comptom will give the politicians just what they want, even though he thinks it is a bit bizarre under the totality of the circumstances.

And that's just what he does before a plethora of cameras and reporters. Not only are the major Florida newspapers, radio and TV stations represented, so is *Oprah*, CNN, *Larry King Live* and *Sixty Minutes*. Then comes Ronnie's turn. What he has planned to say, however, is not what comes forth. What comes forth is something he would never in his wildest dreams dare to say. But he cannot, for the life of him, not say it.

"Hello there. As Mr. Comptom has said, I'm Ronnie Davis, a lawyer from Alabama, representing Riley Strange. I've known Riley since I was six years old, in first grade. We went to law school together, then practiced law together until he recently retired because something a lot bigger came along, which is why we are all here today.

"What I have to say today is that this case is beyond the jurisdiction of the State of Florida and even beyond the jurisdiction of the United States Government. After having a near-death experience, my client was unwittingly and without his knowledge made into an instrument of God, not unlike what happened to many famous Bible people who asked to do something that made a lot of other people angry and caused them to want to outcast or even kill them. That was before there were psychiatric institutions. Today, that, or prison, is where most of those great people in the Bible would end up, if they were among us now.

"Yet instead of saying Mr. Strange was not in his right mind when he did what he did, or was driven by his Creator to do it, it is said he was driven by evil, that he committed a crime. We contend that the fruits of what he did speak the truth: that he was indeed an instrument of God. That he did not at first know he was an instrument is not the issue. Over time he came to know he was an instrument and he accepted it as his lot, as many people in the Bible reluctantly accepted their calling into service for God as their lot. Often at the expense of their very lives and certainly at the expense of their

reputations in large segments of their society.

"The fact of the matter is, what happened to Willa Sue Jenkins was a marvelous miracle. There is no other way to describe it. Miracles come from God. The State of Florida has chosen to put God on trial and Riley Strange will stand in court as God's proxy. I am proud to be the lawyer chosen to represent the defense in this case, and I would not care in the least to be the lawyers assigned to prosecute it, or the judge assigned to try it. There will be no jury. We will leave it all in the hands of the judge to decide, as happened to Pontius Pilate.

"As for securing the person of my client to stand trial, the State of Florida need not worry. Riley Strange will be there willingly. As will his lovely wife be there, standing by her man. To insure Mr. Strange's presence at trial, I now offer my law license as security. If Riley Strange is able of body and mind and does not show up for trial, then I will resign from the practice of law, so help me God. Damn. Now do I perhaps know how Judas must have felt when Jesus chose him to be the betrayer. No wonder the man hung himself afterwards!"

Avatar

Riley and Willa Sue watched the press conference on television in the Atlanta airport, en route to Dominica. Riley wanted to go there one more time, and Willa Sue wanted to see it. They did not sneak in but flew from Antigua to Roseau's airport, on the west side of the island. They stayed two weeks and in that time did all necessary on their end of it to secure the eventual issuance of their Dominica citizenship papers and passports. Riley decided to go with the original plan of buying a \$100,000 certificate of deposit in a Dominica bank. Maybe he had already done enough for the country, or maybe he would want to do more later.

Willa Sue met with the two obeahs; both women's ancestors had been British slaves. She met with them not to learn to cast spells to protect Riley or herself, but to learn about that part of the human existence. Obeahs are like wizards: they manipulate the lower spirit realms, which manipulate the human realm. Willa Sue did not feel that she was obeah material. She sensed that her way is to examine a human situation, discern the issues, then ask Divine Providence to intervene with the highest solution for all concerned. This is the way of the shaman—shamanca, if you are a woman. In the ilk of Jesus and other great shamans.

Such transformers download divine electricity into humanity, which is the source of life on earth. Without such transformers breaking down divine electricity into wattage humanity can use, humanity would explode from being overloaded. Like Mary Lou exploded when she received too much divine electricity at one time in the form of winning the lottery. She knew the money was hers to use for God, but she did not yet know how that was to come about. Riley gave her the formula, more or less, but in her increased electrical excitement she blew out her circuits and was lost to humanity. This is why she is back, doing what she can from the other side to restore what was lost. As Jesus was backed up by Mary Magdalene, Riley also needs a shamanca to companion him on earth and in the spirit, as his divine essence fully enters his human vehicle, bringing that essence to earth—"Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth..."

The way of an avatar is always difficult, because an avatar is a manifestation of God in form. An avatar is like an extraterrestrial being from an advanced civilization in another universe, who wakes up one day on earth feeling like he has just landed among primitive beings who believe the sun is their father, the moon is their mother, earth is the center of the universe, and God only worries about their troubles. The avatar rather hates his new existence, wishes he was back where he came from, seldom smiles, sometimes weeps, and does things that just about everyone else believes proves he is insane. And often the avatar believes he himself is insane, because he is so different from everyone else. Women can be avatars, too.

Jesus was born an avatar. Buddha, Joan of Arc and the male and female disciples of Jesus were made into avatars, as were others in recorded and unrecorded earth history. The avatar process is described in the anonymous and mysterious New Testament Letter to the Hebrews. That text is about Melchizedek, the King of Salem (Peace), the eternal being of the Old Testament to whom Abraham paid tribute. Hebrews is also about another Melchizedek—Jesus—in the New Testament. The Melchizedek initiation is for avatars both born and made. Hebrews was actually written by Mary Magdalene, Jesus' first ordained minister of the Gospel, according to the Scriptures. She didn't put her name on it because no man would have ever read it, had she done so.

None of this is known to Riley and Willa Sue. It is happening to them in the blind. That is, they are coming into the changes not knowing what is the true nature of the changes, or the purpose or the outcome. Indeed, the result of the appearance of an avatar on earth is never pre-determined. Rather, the primitives are given the avatar's model as a living example, for them to choose to copy or not. So far in human history, the primitives have chosen to remain primitives, as the current sad state of humanity readily suggests. For only in a terribly primitive civilization are armies, lawyers, judges and police used to maintain law and order. That is why a lawyer was chosen to become an avatar, and his wife was chosen to be his ground to earth and his uplink to God. His Muse, in other words.

In advanced species everyone is avatar. Everyone receives the divine electricity. Therefore, everyone simply lives and lets live. Only primitive species behave the way humans behave, abusing themselves and each other because they cannot receive the divine energies. This species malaise is not without its beneficiaries, however. For there are many spirits which also are cut off from directly assessing the divine electricity. To survive, they feed off the emotions of the primitives, in form and in spirit. Thus it behooves these parasites to stir up as much emotional commotion as possible, which translates into a large food supply.

I know this is true because I am a literary god, and we literary gods know everything. If you do not believe me, read about other more famous literary gods who were certain they knew everything too. Many of them you will find in the Bible, but they can be found in other books by those curious enough to go there. Which discussion brings us to the point of having gone into it: Riley's trial in Port St. Joe, the county seat of Gulf County.

Port St. Joe, of course, is named in memory of the stepfather of Jesus, according to the Scriptures. That irony is not lost on many who are now glued to their television sets around the world, as CNN covers the trial just as fully as it covered the O.J. Simpson trial.

However, this is a very short trial because the defense has conceded the kidnapping charge under secular law and thereby has bypassed that issue being tried. What the defense argues is that the trial court either does not have jurisdiction because God has intervened and assumed exclusive

jurisdiction, or the case should be dismissed because the unwilling prosecutrix, one Willa Sue Jenkins, has forgiven and loves the perpetrator. To punish the perpetrator under such circumstances would be far more traumatic to the prosecutrix than was being kidnapped in the first place.

Jeb Bush, the Florida Attorney General, Sam Devaney, and the Gulf County District Attorney, Richard Preston, have been swamped with letters and emails from all over the world. Ninety percent of the correspondence is in favor of God, ten percent in favor of the State of Florida. Alas, these men swore under oath when they took their respective positions to enforce the laws of the State of Florida with their very lives. In their eyes, those oaths were covenants they made with God. This has been pointed out many times now in the media. Therefore, these men are not about to break those oaths.

This dilemma led into a movement to persuade Jeb Bush to pardon Riley Strange, as an act of compassionate conservatism and mercy. However, Jeb Bush had already made it plain as day, before the public viewpoint was made manifest to him, that he was fully behind everything that Assistant Attorney General Marion Comptom had said at the press conference in Tallahassee, and he had no intention of intervening with the enforcement of laws passed by the state legislature to protect all Florida citizens from criminals.

Jeb Bush's father had got himself in hot water for saying, when he ran for president the first time, that he would never raise taxes. Then he raised taxes and said it was all just political talk, and he shouldn't be held accountable for that. Jeb's brother, George W., had said in his run for the Oval Office that he would do everything he could to protect the environment. However, after being elected, he came under tremendous pressure from the oil industry that had poured a ton of *dinero* into his political campaign. Presto, he then said that his environmental promise conflicted with his campaign promise to maximize energy production in the United States, so he had to abandon his promise to curb pollution. That move really upset the rest of the world and made George W. out to be a son of the Father of Lies. No, Jeb Bush is not going into the sad footsteps of his father and brother. He is sticking to his guns. The law is on his side: "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's," he had often said, when challenged about being a compassionate conservative Christian, like his brother, George W.

If you think this is tongue-in-cheek, you are mistaken. It is dead earnest. As is Judge John Love dead earnest as he sits behind his bench looking down at his packed courtroom, knowing his goose is cooked no matter what he says. Despite his wife's fury over the State prosecuting Riley Strange and hurting that poor woman again, when he was sworn in Judge Love took a solemn oath to protect and enforce the laws of The State of Florida. Meaning, the defense's arguments are without merit. Let the Florida appellate courts rule otherwise, if they so desire. But he is going by the letter of the law in the meantime. Riley Strange is guilty of intentional and callous kidnapping of one Willa Sue Jenkins.

Now for the sentencing. The hard part. For now Judge Love can use judicial discretion and restraint. He says that he cannot go easy on Riley Strange because of the precedent it might set. If he suspends sentence and puts Riley Strange on probation, then every crackpot in Florida will start doing crazy things and claiming God was behind it and they ought not be punished for it by more than a slap on the wrist. That the victim in this case fell in love with the perpetrator is not relevant. That is known to happen in captive situations, and Judge Love takes judicial cognizance of that fact. That the victim also says she is better off, and she even looks better off for the experience, is also not relevant. That the victim may have been saved from her abusive family, who packed up and left for parts unknown after hearing from the Gulf County District attorney that they were under investigation, is also not relevant. What is relevant is that Riley Strange, an experienced criminal lawyer, knowingly and willfully

violated the laws of the State of Florida, and now he wants to be let off essentially scot-free.

After hearing Judge Love sentence him to ten years in the penitentiary, beginning immediately, Riley turns to Ronnie, says, "As we agreed, no appeal. There is no issue of law to take upstairs. The sentence is within standard parameters: he could have given me life in the pen had he wanted to. An appeal will only delay it. I can get out in a little over three years, with good time. Perhaps sooner, if Governor Bush relents. I was prepared for this result, as you know. As was Willa Sue. God has a reason for it, and you are not to feel badly that it turned out this way."

The first night in Dominica Riley had dreamt of Judge Allgood again. Judge reminded Riley to keep the case away from a jury. Next, Judge said that this trial tactic was not to get Riley off from doing time but to put Riley where God wanted Riley to be, because God didn't trust a jury to do that. Indeed, Riley and Ronnie had both felt that no jury in the world would convict him, after the Jenkins family cut and ran when the D.A. went after them. That triggered a hope that the Governor would intervene with a pardon, or that the judge would be lenient. But by the time the trial came, they knew the Governor had painted himself into a box he could not graciously escape, and the judge was not about to cross the Governor who had appointed him to his post in the first place. Home cooking. An out-of-town lawyer's worst nightmare.

Willa Sue was also prepared for this result that same night in Dominica. Mary Lou came to her in a dream and said, "Riley lost me for the rest of this life. Can you be without him for only a little while, if that is what God wants to happen?" Willa Sue wept herself awake. Then Riley told her his dream.

After that, they did Dominica at dead slow speed. Turned in the rental car and started hitchhiking and riding the local buses wherever they went. They wanted to meet as many Dominicans as possible, absorb as much of that island as they could. They were invited into peoples' homes to visit, have a toddy, eat, watch television. They were given tours of fruit orchards. They were taken places no tourists are ever taken, places like Petite Savanne high up on the mountain looking down over the Atlantic and Grand Bay. They swam in the secret cove at Point Baptiste, just south of Calabishee on the north Atlantic coast. They went spearing for parrot fish and lobster with young Dominican boys. They went out for dolphin with commercial fisherman using hand lines. They cast jigs from yo-yo reels for jack fish from rocky coasts. They snorkeled the cove at Scotshead on the south Caribbean shore and saw a rainbow universe of tropical fishes. They dined at Papiotte high in the mountain valley overlooking Roseau, got drunk on fine French wine. They haggled in the open market at Roseau, washed clothes in the adjacent river with Dominican women. And when they walked out of the waiting room to the Liat Otter that would take them northward, the island came to them and wept with them. As this writer weeps with them now.

Soul Fishing

Six months ago, Riley kissed Willa Sue goodbye in Judge John Love's courtroom and was cuffed and taken directly to the state penitentiary outside of Jacksonville without passing Go. What that has been like for them Willa Sue wants to say. She wants to say it in a letter to Oprah Winfrey.

Dear Oprah, our friend,

Ronnie Davis sent your kind note asking what was happening with us. I was out of town promoting the books when the letter came and then I was back and was spending as much visiting time with Riley on the weekend as they let us. Now it is Sunday night before I leave again in the morning for more publicity stuff and I have time to myself to tell you what all has been going on.

I left the courthouse when they took Riley away and headed straight to Birmingham to pack up whatever I could in the car and headed for Jacksonville. I rented a small apartment just a couple of miles from the motel and began finding what I wanted for the apartment to make it suit me. Prisoners can be visited on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. I see Riley in a room that is sort of like a cafeteria. We get ourselves a table and talk as if nobody else is around. The other visitors and inmates do that too. Riley says there are over a thousand men in the motel and most of them barely have any contact with people on the outside. Just a few letters sometimes, but not much visiting.

What is happening in Birmingham Ronnie passes along by email. Yes, as is now plain as day, I got myself a laptop and learned how to use it. Learned even how to type and use the spell checker and the part of the word processor program that makes good grammar. I'm writing my own book now about my new life and it don't do to be sounding ignorant. Well, not too ignorant! A little ignorance Riley says is charming, part of my special magic. Guess I will always be some redneck. Maybe I might name the book Redneck Messiah. Riley insists that Eve was the first messiah and Adam and the rest of the rednecks got it all backwards and would still be fornicating with monkeys and men if it wasn't for Eve. What do you think?

Speaking of rednecks, never yet has anybody figured out where my folks and Harlan and his wife and kids went off to. My brother Jake never says, but I think he knows. He writes to me sometimes, wants to know what it is like to be rich and famous. I don't think he believes we gave most of it away. Even Riley gave away his book which is selling like hotcakes. He had Ronnie make up a foundation that the government couldn't tax and gave the book royalties to the foundation. It's called The Prison Freedom Project.

Riley got the idea for it from reading some books he found in the motel library by a fellow named Bo Lozoff who used to go into prisons with his wife, Sita, and teach inmates yoga and how to get along with each other and to be spiritual in their lives instead of being miserable and resentful and not changing. Bo says we are all doing time in some way. I know about that. I was doing time big time when Riley came along and kidnapped me. Then I did some more time but in a different way. Now I'm doing time in another kind of way, being out here and him being in there. But he won't be in there forever, and then we will do time together out there if the creek don't rise in the meantime. You probably never heard tell of that saying. It's how rednecks say, if God is willing.

Bo Lozoff was involved with setting up a library for prisoners called the Prison Library Project out in California. Any inmate that writes there and asks for a book about something is sent a book on that topic for free, if a book is in the library on that topic. Or another book is sent instead as close to the topic as the library has in stock. Riley likes The Prison Library Project but says he isn't sure about how effective Bo is with prisoners. Bo has some strange ideas about sex being unspiritual and says that he and Sita wish they didn't want to have sex anymore. That is the main thing Riley doesn't go along with. (Poor Sita, I think.) Riley also thinks Bo is pretty big on Bo and doesn't let Sita speak for

herself. (See what I mean?) But Riley also says Bo worked real hard to help prisoners and didn't make much money at it and he deserves a big hand clap for that. And for helping start a farm of some kind in North Carolina where prisoners can go and get a new start in life after they get out.

Ronnie runs The Prison Freedom Project, with help from

lawyers in the firm and other lawyers he knows. They only handle cases of prison inmates. They are already helping some inmates in the motel, but Riley helps even more just doing what he does with people. When he was put in the motel everyone in there already knew him from him being on TV so many times. They couldn't wait to meet him. A hero he was. Never once did anyone give him any trouble like what often happens to people when they are sent up. You know that if they had given Riley any trouble he would have made them wish they had left him alone.

I still laugh at all the times I tried to kill Riley when he had me locked up. He always stopped me by getting me in a karate hold that I knew would hurt like the dickens if I didn't stop trying to kill him. Didn't stop me from wanting to kill him, but it stopped me from trying. It was like there was two of me and I never knew when the killer would come out. The killer was crazy. Riley loved the killer until it quit wanting to kill. Riley does that with the men in there too.

He started doing karate training out in the yard as soon as he got in there. Did it barefoot in his pants and a tee-shirt until they let me bring in a gi for him to wear. Wasn't long before men were trying to copy him and were asking him to teach them. About forty men now train with him every day and nobody messes with those forty. A lot more than that come to him asking for legal advice.

Most of them are appealing their convictions or trying to reopen their cases. They claim they didn't have a good lawyer, somebody lied against them, or DNA evidence will get them off now. But Riley won't talk with them about their case until he finds out from them whether or not they are guilty of what they were convicted of. Most of them are but it takes them a while to say it. He tells them it will do them no good to get legal help if they don't confess what they did and feel sorry for it. If they don't do that, he tells them they will just keep getting in trouble in prison or when they get out. Those that confess and feel sorry for it he sends to Ronnie and the Prison Project, if he thinks that might do any good. Otherwise, he tells them to start getting in shape and do something creative and get free in that way.

Riley got permission to grow flowers and vegetables around the edge of the yard. I brought him the seeds. Some of the men help him. He has got men wanting to learn how to write. He tells them to get a notebook or a computer if they can and start telling a story about themselves. Start at the beginning and tell it to the end. They meet and share their stories, give each other ideas and encouragement. Tease each other. He's also got some of them writing poetry. Others started reading about drawing and painting, and now some of them are doing that. They have their art and poems up on the walls in there. Riley says it is pretty good stuff for criminals. I enclose some poems that inmates sent to me that I really liked and typed up into a little file. They say I am their woman. All other women are crazy. Ha! Got myself a harem.

We got Riley a laptop too. He is using it to write about what is happening to him in there. Right now he calls it "More Wanderings of an Ex-Lawyer." I keep telling him he ought to call it "Soul Fishing." He can't get online so I print out emails sent to him and mail them to him at the motel. As long as they are not from someone in another prison he can get them. Prisoners are not allowed to write to prisoners in another motel. Makes no sense to us, but that is how it is. Riley writes replies to the

emails onto a disk and gives it back to me the next time I see him and I go back to the apartment and take the reply off the disk and email it to whoever sent it. Riley had to get special permission from the warden to give me the disks by hand. Otherwise, he would have had to mail them to me.

Riley also gets tons of letters and he answers them directly. He hears from people all over the world and they are asking him what to do about a legal problem, or how to have a near-death experience, or how to find their own Mary Lou or Willa Sue. He usually tells them stories about himself and other people so they can get the message in that way. Sometimes though he tells them straight up what he thinks. Sometimes people can hear straight up but most people cannot hear that way. He knows how to do it with each person. He is a good soul fisherman and says he doesn't miss fishing the old way so much, but he misses hearing the birds go into symphony at dawn and watching the night skies.

I take my laptop traveling with me and write at night, when I'm alone. I get a lot of letters and emails too that need answering. Even inmates. Imagine me giving people advice. Fat people mostly. I also write on my own book in the motel room. Then I email what I write to Riley from somewhere, and when I see him after he has read it he tells me what he thinks about it.

I really miss being with Riley, as a woman is with a man, but I feel him all around me, inside of me. Sometimes I hear him say something to me. Sometimes I even see him. And he says he feels me inside of him and I sing to him all the time. All of his old favorite love songs. He hears them in his head. They tell him how I am feeling about him at that time. And he hears other songs too. One he hears is "Stars Fell on Alabama." He loves that song. Whistles the tune whenever he starts hearing it. Says he finally realized it was the music of the spheres. Then he had to explain what that meant. And other songs about Alabama too. "Sweet Home Alabama." "Old Suzanna!" Alabama is what many of the men in the motel call him. I'm not going to say all the names I call him. That would be too embarrassing.

Riley writes poems to me, like he wrote to Mary Lou. He started doing that after we learned he was going to be prosecuted. I cry when I read those poems. Even write some poems of my own now. But I'm too shy to share them with anyone but Riley. Maybe I will put some of them in my book.

Goodness gracious. I almost forgot to tell you the most amazing part of this. About a month ago the fellow next to Riley got out on the street. He was replaced by a new inmate, who was sitting in his new house in the motel when Riley came back to his house. That's what they call their cells in there. Riley had been out in the yard teaching karate. The new man, you are not going to believe this, weighs about three hundred and fifty pounds. But that's not the part you won't believe. The part you won't believe is that he looks in the face just like Riley's brother Jack that got killed in Vietnam. Like a lot of the men in the motel, this new man fought in Vietnam and you know what Riley has set out to do about that!

All our love,

Willa Sue Strange for us both

P.S. You can read this letter on your show, if you want to.

Jack Crevalle Chorus

Oprah, here are some poems the men in the motel sent to me to keep. Some of them made me cry. Some made me smile.

Willa Sue.

Flashers and Photographers

Writing poetry is so easy
compared to being on stage
dragging my soul before you all
expressing these thoughts and feelings
wondering if they are understandable,
Are these thoughts novel enough,
or too new to be understood?
But here I stand.
Exposed like a slaughtered deer.

For this short moment
I am not growing;
but like a photograph, examinable
by my self,
and by you.
So I take this painful opportunity.
I, no exhibitionist,
expose myself to you,
no voyeurs.
Maybe the experience will be memorable,
enough...to inspire poetry.
Written by you, written by me.

Just Be Me

Just be me,
It ain't so bad now
but there be the time
when it was right hard
'cause I tried to be somebody else
that would make other people happy
who didn't know me,
And now they don't like me
'cause I don't live by rules other people makes
who be 'fraid of themselves.

The Valley Deep

I know... 'how I know,
the loneliest depths that a soul can reach.
This valley deep, where light does scarcely shine;
where silence has a face that mocks the heart
that dares to trust in providence, divine.
This journey to the depths, where only faith survives;
and where even faith can seem like
an illusion brought forth from the madness of despair.
Yet, I know within my heart of hearts
the hand of Wisdom brought me here.
And afflicted with Her chains of love
my eyes have opened wide,
to see those arms of faithfulness draw me to His side.
Oh' purged in flames of truth and grace,
His spirit *sanctifies*,
and *comforts*,
and *abides*!
But how I long to join the living once again.

The Trail in the Woods

I call out his name;
I seek his face,
And walk quietly into the wood.

He whispers my name
And shows me the Way;
As only this *lovely one* could.

In wisdom he leads me
And prompts me to follow
And promises *life* if I would.

In humble submission, I cry
Not mine, but *your will*;
He asks me to trust...and I should.

He points to the cross and says
That's where we're going
And the spirit in me understood.

I called out his name
and saw his face,
...And walked quietly into the wood...

Suicide

There are those mysteries in this life
beyond what we can know;
those secret places in the heart
where only God can go.
These higher ways beyond our grasp are only
known to Him, and with providential wisdom
He withholds such things from men.
Yet there are treasures gladly shared from
heaven's throne above,
like caring hearts and tender words of mercy
and of love.
There is so much that He reveals;

so much that we can do
to bear each other's burdens,

and help each other through.
And of all the light God shares with men
there is no truth that's deeper, than
this precious age-old truth of life...
We are our brother's keeper!

The Mockingbird

I happen'd upon dis mockingbird
singing his fool head off.
I ask him how and why he sing
but all he do be look ahead,
All he do be sing.
He never turn to see if I be watching
Or listen for money jingling in my pockets
Or ask if I like his music
Or expect a recording contract.
He be too busy singing
to pay no attention to me.

Jesus Woman

Black Rose
Sweet mystery
Blood of Christ,
Living water
without who
God be dead.

Rainbows

Rainbows know no master.

Fueled by father sun
they touch misty earth only heaven knows where.

Rainbows are more shiny than silver
and more brilliant than gold,
More valuable than diamonds
and more precious than pearls.

Rainbows paint heavens beautiful,
Make angels sing;
Rainbows are you, and me,
Full spectrums of Infinity
blazing across Eternity.

Rainbows are now,
For there is no somewhere over the rainbow
nor any pot of gold at the end,
There is only the rainbow.

Heartsongs

My soul be singing today for joy,
I barely hear it through my density.
It say to rejoice, have good heart,
For the terrible war within
be done run its course and peace comes

'cause there be nothing else to kill
leaving now only death—Void
into which pure gold flows.
Freed from ancient wars
all the soldiers be passed away.
Only lovers live here now.

Heavy Wait

I know what it is to love fully,
have my heart broken by death
and by loved ones' rejections,

so I can love even more.

I know what it is to be engulfed in pain,
awash in evil,
terrified, enraged, despaired,
believing God has again forsaken me,
then be given the truth
that again makes me free.

I know what it is to doubt, be lost and wandering
time and time again,
then be rescued yet again and my faith grows deeper.

I know what it is to blindly trust,
then be destroyed by betrayal
time after time again,
until I trust only God.

I know what it is to have much and be completely of this world,

then have it all taken away

and be in the world but not of it.

I know what it is to fail in this world,
and fail and fail and fail:
The world's greatest failure,
I can serve only God.

I know what it is to give and give and give and give;

I cannot stop giving

because giving is receiving.

I know what it is to explain God
time after time after time again.
Something demands that I keep explaining:
Maybe someone will listen,
Maybe me.

Footnote: Birdie McClaine's idea was that an “actress” of large proportions would be given the role of Mary Lou Snow and Willa Sue Jenkins. The movie would be shot in reverse, as the actress loses weight. She gets paid only if she completes the weight loss, as in the book.

When this book fell out of me in mid-2001, I assumed Port St. Joe and Apalachicola were in the same Florida County. Apalachicola is in Franklin County. My apologies for leaving both towns in Gulf County, but to correct it would have required a major re-write that would have really twisted the spirit of the tale, or is it the tail of the spirit?

Author's Note

Although this is a work of fiction, some events really happened (the Vietnam war, and the war in Grenada, and the effect of that war on the Caribbean island nation of Dominica). Somewhat included in the story are author Stephen King, concerning his novel, *The Stand*; former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, concerning his role in the Vietnam war; former Governor of Alabama Don Siegleman, concerning his role in attempting to bring a state lottery into Alabama; Jeb Bush and George Bush and their father, concerning their stands on law and order; President Ronald Reagan and Eugenia Charles (once President of Dominica), concerning Dominica's role in persuading the American public that the invasion of Dominica was necessary; Judge Clarence Allgood, of Birmingham, Alabama (whom I knew personally and intimately, as his law clerk and thereafter—he died in 1991, as I recall); Shihan Oyama, under whom I studied karate for a while in Birmingham, late in life, long enough to realize I was way out of my depth; and Bo Lozoff and his wife Sita, who live in North Carolina still, I believe, and who have done a lot of work with prison inmates, about which Bo has written several books. There really is an Olive's Guesthouse on lovely Dominica, or there was when I was last there in 1996, and Olive was the owner's first name. I don't remember her last name, and made one up for her in the book. A wonderful person, I miss Olive to this day. I may or may not have taken some poetic license with Stephen King and the political figures. I wrote truly about Judge Allgood's profound influence on a young lawyer, and wept plenty when I did so. Darn, I'm about to weep now, just remembering. I painted Bo Lozoff and Sita accurately, based on what is in the books Bo wrote, and newsletters I received from them, which they were sending out to many people in the early 1990s. They are well known for their work, Bo is interviewed publicly, or used to be, and they fall into the category of public figures. I also included Oprah Winfrey in the tale, but I have never met and only know about her from what I have seen on television and have read. I believe she would appreciate the catalytic role she plays in the story, and she is a public figure.

HEAVY WAIT

A Strange Tale

his curious tale is about a strange man who becomes a very good and prosperous trial lawyer during his training in the school of hard knocks, in life, love and the practice of law. Then, he meets Mary Lou Snow, and everything really changes. Then, everything really changes again as he meets Mary Lou Snow again, although she isn't really Mary Lou Snow—but she really is. Then, the tale gets even stranger, and then, it gets even stranger. To tell more will spoil the story—just like going to the end of a book.

SLOAN BASHINSKY was born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama. In 1982, at age forty, he began writing consumer-oriented books based on experiences in his law practice. Then his life took a major change, and thereafter his writings were laced with experiences of and not of this world. *Heavy Wait* is his fourth novel.

